

Rifle

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Summary: It's about four Spartans on a planet called Lacid. Flood have reappeared, which also causes a widespread virus outbreak. A new flood, called the HAZARD, disguises itself as a human; particularly a Spartan.

1. Flooded Cave

****Rifle****

****Chapter one****

Onward they marched, boots splashing in the mud;
>every single soul was afraid of what lie ahead, in the deep cave they stood before.
They could only guess what hid in the deep depths of this horrid place.
>"Time to go." One of them stepped forwards, with a slight tremor in his step.
Kyle.
>The man in black and deep red took lead.
The woman he Adored, Aron, followed behind him- in armor of Aqua. Next was Elizabeth, the charcoal and blood-red Spartan, who pulled the straggling member of the pack with her; Bant stumbled forwards under her iron grip, his armor gray and white. Weapons in tow, they all prepared themselves for this mission.

An eerie wind crept and blew through the cave, making soft music of malice nature. Where the wind came from or went to, was something that made no sense- it caused any of them shivers to think about.

On that foreign planet, and through that small entrance, they kept a slow pace. Bant shook, and Elizah squeezed his hand tighter "Calm down." She whispered through the helmet's intercom. Aron and Kyle smiled inside their helmets, _this is silly_, Aron thought, _there's nothing even here_.

Upon that small thought, she realized the ground, which had been mud and rocks only moments before, was something completely different.

It's color and texture resembled a sickly flesh. It bubbled and popped underneath her boots, covering them in the sticky substance. She stopped and stared down at this malevolent-like structure; it made her shiver in disgust. "What is this?" She looked all around- it was everywhere.

The flesh covered the walls that lie ahead, as the small entrance opened into a huge room, with many columns and catacombs that led on into the ghostly darkness. Elizabeth and Bant stopped behind her, and Kyle stopped in front of her as well.

Elizah and Bant soon then saw it, too. The flesh glowed from the flashlights on their guns. It was something out of the worst of nightmares, how it seemed truly alive, whatever it was. It floated and fell as if it breathed- making them really wonder what this mission was for. Elizah felt as if she was entering the stomach of a beast, while Bant wondered if it was a poor creature they were stepping upon.

"Lets keep going, ignore it." Kyle looked back at his team.

Aron looked back up- at Kyle. He was being different from usual- more like a leader- she almost started to admire him for that, but she felt uncomfortable. _Why is him being _responsible_ phasing me?_ She thought, puzzled. _Maybe it's just the alien atmosphere._

The team advanced on, atop the fleshy ground towards the center column. It had these strange pods that seemed a yellow brown in the lighting- they swayed slightly in that unexplainable wind- to that melancholy tune. The brownish pods also seemed to be breathing, seeming even more alive than the walls. Elizah reached out her left hand, curious of the things texture.

"Elizah! No!" Kyle screamed through the intercom.

It was too late, Elizah's armored fingers felt the small clear bubble or yellow-brown. It was soft and rough like skin. The instant she felt this thing, it moved. It wiggled from its place, quicker than she could have imagined something wiggle, and it turned around. The thing had root-like and tentacle arms that latched onto her hand with a violent pulse. "Ah!" Elizah tried to shake the thing loose, it was trying to undo her armor and get up under it.

"Elizah!" Aron cocked back her loaded pistol and shot with precision.

>It blew off the main armor on the back of Elizah's hand, but it also made the creature's bubbly head explode, and its limp body dropped to the floor.<p>

"What in heck _was_ that thing?" Bant got nearer to Elizah and examined her hand. He felt guilty for not reacting as quickly as Aron- for not protecting her. The back of her hand smoked with where the first layer of armor flew off.

"I don't know, but there's about to be a lot more." Aron re-loaded, pulling out her shotgun as well. The little popcorns writhed from their place in a lively motion. The gunshot awoke them from their swaying slumber. The gunshot that still evidently echoed through the deepest pasts of the cave.

The whole team pulled their weapons as well, and backed away from the column, realizing that the other columns around them, besides that center one, had awoken.

They formed a circle, their backs facing inwards, as the creatures started to approach them. Kyle ripped the safety pin and let a grenade fly- it bounced from the pink and fleshed wall and exploded against one of the columns. As soon as the others realized this, it became too late for anyone else to just grenade the things before they got too close.

The war started. Between the humans and the creatures that surrounded them, soon the little popcorns were all exploded and gone.

"That was a little too easyâ€|" Bant looked around at the rest of the group, they didn't pay heed to it. "I mean, seriouslyâ€| this mission was ranked higher than thatâ€|" >His eyes looked around nervously.<p>

"Do you think our superiors knew about these things?" Kyle turned to Bant, a little anger showed. At this point, disrespect towards the system that they risked their lives for almost seemed like a death wish. Almost. "And they wouldn't have told us!" he stepped forward, almost as to grab Bant by the collar.

"I'm sayingâ€| It's possibleâ€|" he kept up kyle's stare with his own.

"We won't know until we get back, so both of you need to shut it." Aron snapped, and walked between them, forcing them to break gazes.

"Your soldier needs to know what he's talking about." Kyle looked to Elizah.

>Elizah glared a little from under her red visor, but was careful to hide it from everyone. Then she blushed; he implied that she owned Bant. She liked that thought, but she hid those feelings as well. She shivered a bit in anger, biting her lip. Aron looked at Kyle in annoyance. How dare he be so rude?_

"Uhâ€|Kyleâ€|" Aron was frozen in place. Her gun aimed at the far corner of the room- where this moving mass was huddled and moving together towards them. It looked like twenty Spartans, lined up, all together, pushing forward.

It wasn't Spartans. Kyle and the others turned, seeing the monsters in front of them. Their arms twisted and bended in different directions, and it had inhuman like growths and deformities all over their bodies. They had these strange wrinkled structures where a head would be while human heads hung loosely to their sides; out of their mouths stuck living branches tipped with a straggly red.

Every gun loaded. Elizah pulled out something else from her backpack besides the shotgun. As one of the beasts broke its way from the pack and rushed them, it screamed. It was already shot and writhing on the ground: On Fire.

Bant turned to Elizah "Is that a flame-thrower?" she could hear his shotgun click, ready to aim. "I might have Modded one of these

standard guns a littleâ€¦" The flames shot out again, claiming another monster to the flesh below. The creatures roared- whether for their fallen comrades or for a fresh meal was unclear. The shrill cries gave Bant shivers.

The whole pack of monsters rushed forwards at once, the flamethrower claimed about half of them before they got too close to char-grill. Elizah and Bant started to back up some, and Elizah saw Aron reach for her back, she grabbed a small bar-like thing and it started to glow with a bright blue light: an energy sword.

Everyone saw it- the Blue glowing sword.
>"Aron! That's illegal!" Elizah whined. Looking in total awe- both relief and terror crept to her.<p>

"What? Modding is illegal, too!" She rushed at the pack, eliminating most of the strange creatures with a single swipe of her hand. The blue glow was majestic not only because of it's radiant light- but it's use and effectiveness.

"There's-on-ly-one-mo-re" Aron tuned in a singsong sort of way, laughing, as she rushed towards the creature. This one was different; it was bulky and had two small, stubbly legs. It walked slowly towards her, while she went full speed at it. Something seemed off, but Aron in her adrenaline took no reason to realize it.

She swung her sword, and the lowly thing exploded, sending her flying backwards and on her back. "Aron!" Kyle cried out, as the explosion released a bunch of popcorns that were all over Aron in seconds.

Quickly, Kyle reached for his sniper, aiming at the evil creatures all over her. Hitting each one perfectly. Killing them off one by one before they could even have a chance to break any of her armor. She writhed, clawing at the popcorns, giving Kyle difficulty to aim. His shot caused a ringing as it hit her armor, she screamed.

"Kyle! Are you trying to kill me?" She breathed heavily through the intercom- at this point the others were rushing near her, carefully staying out of Kyle's line of fire. Even at a close distance, there was nothing they could do that wouldn't injure Aron.

"The sword!" Bant ran and grabbed the glowing slice-machine, but there was no way they could get close with Kyle still trying to kill the little bubbles. "Kyle, cease fire!" Elizah yelled through the intercom, as then Bant approached Aron and destroyed the rest that were on her.

Aron couldn't move so much anymore, those little demons sapped away her energy. She could barely curl her fingers without feeling exhausted- while the words everyone was shouting rang through her mind like a dream. Like lost and hopeless memories, her friends looked down into her eyes.

"Aronâ€¦" Elizah tapped Aron's visor violently "Aron!" she shook Aron's shoulders.

"Iâ€¦I'm fineâ€¦" sounded through the intercom, but it was halfway a groan. Kyle just stood back with his sniper still poised, waiting.

Elizah helped Aron to her feet; Aron's arm around her neck, she trudged back to Kyle. Aron's mind rushed with many a thoughts- not a single one made sense. _Kyleâ€|what were you doing? Why haven't youâ€|? Kyle would have been the first to my side. Kyle should have cracked a joke by now. _

"Kyleâ€|" she moaned, her vision blurry. He ignored it. "I'm going around this pillar to the part below, there doesn't seem to be any of thisâ€|stuff down there." He looked down at the flesh of the ground before staring back at the pillar of which he spoke. "I'll scout ahead, while you two carry her." He turned on his heel and went around the pillar, around the pillar the ground sloped downwards, like a smooth winding staircase. There was a small cliff by the pillar, which the rest of the team went and looked over- they saw Kyle down below- looking around.

Elizah set Aron down by the small cliff. "So you can watch Kyle." She teased. Even with the helmets on, and even with Elizah's red visor that usually hides her face, Aron knew Elizah smirked and winked.

"Elizah!" Aron shot up from sitting position in a flash, shooting popcorn that jumped at Elizah's head. It popped, and she lost her energy again, stumbling backwards over the edge of the cliff.

Elizah jumped forwards, grabbing Aron by the hand. Aron dangled from the ledge, unable to move. Her energy was gone, her eyes wide from the unexpected fall. Their hands slipped, the armor on their hands made it difficult to hold on.

The bond gave out, and Aron felt like she was flying, all too quickly. For a moment, her eyes could have flashed her whole life, but it didn't. Her body curled into a ball, and though the cliff was short and almost not steep at all, it felt- to her- like she was falling forever.

Arms. Armor.

"I will catch you when you fall, sweetheart"

"Shut up." She punch Kyle's arm.

"Ow." He whined. "So much for _thank-you_"

"Aron!" Elizah screamed, not only through the intercom, but through the air as well. It was a terrified screech. Elizah couldn't see Aron or Kyle down there, because it was so dark.

"I'm fine, Kyle's got me."

"I'll always have you." He laughed.

Aron sighed, she was relieved- Kyle was acting normal. He acted like any other day, now, chasing her skirtâ€| her _armor, _actually. He finally said something lighthearted, something Kyle would actually say. Kyle was his normal self again, but she still wondered what made him act so different in the first place.

"I'm tired, will you carry me?" she yawned.

He turned off his intercom from the others- "Why would I do that?" he laughed, dropping her to the ground. She hit the ground hard, she felt like he threw her.

"Kyle?" she looked up in fear, it was broadcast on the intercom.

"Don't run off!" he yelled, with his intercom fully on.

Aron didn't understand any of this. _What is he talking about?_ She wondered. She almost spoke, to ask him, but he got nearer to her, almost apologetically. That wasn't it. She heard clicking noises as she saw him over her. Her helmet was loose.

No. Kyle was taking her helmet off.

She breathed the last bits of Oxygen that her helmet had left.

Losing consciousness.

She breathed in the chemicals of the air around.

Going blank.

Kyle smiled at her.

Something's wrong, it's dark.

"Kyle!" she fought to stay awake.

He turned, his eyes a faint yellow glow from underneath his helmet, as he tossed hers out of reach.

Her vision blurred.

It wasn't Kyle.

2. Awake

****Rifle****

****Chapter Two****

Aron woke to the light. At first, she couldn't tell what the light was from. It wasn't a torchâ€¦it wasn't a flashlight. It was bright and intense. Not the sun.

She was in her bedroom.

Was it all a dream? She looked around, she could see people standing over her, all blurred. Her vision started to clear- to her right was Kyle, short dark brown hair and fiery eyes- a mystic brown. To her left was Elizah, a full-bodied woman with a crazy blue hair color that stopped above her shoulders and light brown eyes. Bant, ocean eyed and blond, stood next to Elizah. _What are they doing in my bedroom?_

She wasn't in her bedroom. She saw the white ceiling, the white bed sheets, and then the wristbandâ€¦ she was in the hospital. Smiles broke over everyone's faces as her eyes darted back and fourth. Her mood caused them to be almost a white color. Panic.

She didn't understand what was going on. _Hospital?
>We were in the caveâ€¦

"The mission! Did we fail the mission?" she pulled herself up to a sitting position. She almost fell back when pain surged through her.

"The artifact wasn't thereâ€¦ even though it was supposed to beâ€¦" Bant caught her gaze. "Are you okay?"

"She's _my_ girlfriend, let _me_ ask her that!" Kyle broke in.

"I'm no-one's girlfriend, I don't belong to you." She pushed Kyle away. "I'm fine, what about the artifact?" this time she looked to Elizah, her best friend and teammate. Elizah shook her head. Nothing.

"Can we have a girl-talk?" she looked to Bant and Kyle. They backed off, closing the door behind them as they left the hospital room. Elizah took a seat in a chair next to the bed.

"Kyle insisted we continue to search for the artifact. The artifact wasn't there when we got to it. When we got back, we found you unconscious. The officials are considering that you went AWOL in a wayâ€¦" Elizah's sentences bounced together and jumbled. Aron could barely comprehend them all at once. Elizah kept looking back on that day so much, wondering if they should have listened to Kyle. She knew something was up, but she went with it. It made her angry- at herself. She wondered why something didn't click that Aron was in trouble.

"AWOL?" She looked at Elizah, this time her eyes reflected purple, but stayed a shade of deep blue. Elizah, once again, shook her head. "I just don't get itâ€¦ you were unconsciousâ€¦ andâ€¦" Elizah filled with sorrow and confusion.

"When you got here, you had the Pry." Eliza gulped. "They thought you were goneâ€¦"

"The Pry?"

"It's a disease that just had an outbreakâ€¦ Your neckâ€¦" Elizah looked away, towards the floor, starting to tear up. "My handâ€¦" She held up her own hand and looked at it in fear, disgust, and sorrow. "It's like leprosy." Her gaze met Aron's.

Aron looked down at Elizah's left hand, it was swollen a little, and pulsing- it looked painful. It seemed to have it's own heartbeat. "That and the lack of Oxygenâ€¦"

"Whatâ€¦?"

"Do you remember anything? What happened?" Elizah broke from her melancholy silence. She wanted to know. She was always curious, so very curious. About everything, she hated to be left out of anything,

especially among friends. As a child she always had felt Alienated and alone.

"I don't know" Aron looked down, searching her thoughts for any indication of what went on, when she found the thought, she shoved it away. "The last I remember was Kyle catching me off the cliff" She looked around nervously, starting to weave a web of lies. "How am I supposed to tell her what happened?"
>Elizah didn't notice, but looked once again at her hand.<p>

"What do we do now?" Aron sighed. The answer would have been nothing, obviously, but she couldn't help ask it. She felt a little scared about the whole situation- Kyle turning into a yellow-eyed psycho- the artifact disappearing- the Pry- those creatures in the cave- the failed mission- the blame from the government- going AWOL- truth- lies. Everything.

Elizah was scared, too. Even as a soldier- Elizah wanted a fairytale of sorts. She feared the disease would cause her to never have any of that. Screw Marriage, her left hand was leprous. Screw marriage, she was a Spartan. She was always needed for some dangerous mission or another. She was forced to wonder why she chose to be one in the first place. "With my luck", she thought, "it's probably contagious and I'll die". The room was that bitter silence, Elizah had almost forgotten Aron said anything.

>"I can only hope we can do something" her eyes still locked on her hand- on the possibilities and the things that might never happen. The things that, she thought, might as well not happen in her life.<p>

"They say the government is considering evacuating the healthy ones." Elizah swallowed, she could feel tears burning to escape.

>Aron understood what it meant. No Bant. No Kyle. No family or friends; maybe even no more missions. Tension built in the air like a heavy fog.<p>

"Our days as soldiers are over." Elizah leaned back in her chair; Aron handed her a tissue. Elizah accepted it.

"They say, they don't know." Aron caught Elizah's gaze, it calmed them both down. They both had the thought that it wasn't for sure. It wasn't certain what was going to happen. Both of them felt they'd never be certain of anything again. "I'm surprised they let you be a soldier with that hair color." Aron laughed, it made the mood even lighter. Happier.

It compressed all of the depressing thoughts either of them had; it took away their fears for but a moment- but that moment lasted. The moment wouldn't fade from either of them, ever. Their lives were jumbled messes.

"I'm glad we stayed best friends." Elizah smiled, one of those genuine smiles that kept the short happy mood, they couldn't stand the thought of it dying out.

"Me too" Aron sighed.

"You know, you've been out for three weeks" it's been kind'a lonely." Elizah rested her cheek on her palm, with her elbow on the arm of the chair.

"Three weeks!" Aron's eyes widened. Three weeks. Three weeks was way too long for a Spartan of her stature to be out. _The academy is probably talking their stupid rumors already, why do I care? _Then she realized why, she missed a mission or two by now. Bad rep means low-ranked missions. After that though, maybe it was what she needed. Low-profileâ€¦ Low-rankâ€¦ The pain didn't seem to have healed at all in that time. Even worse, she missed the mission she really wanted to do. Kyle was the one who suggested that mission to find the artifactâ€¦ Kyle.

"Yeah, like I saidâ€¦they thought you were goneâ€¦" Elizah turned sad again.

"I'm surprised they have the Spartan program still, anywayâ€¦ the covenant was defeated long agoâ€¦ there's no reason for them, is there?" Aron referred to _The Great War Of Wails_ two years ago- all of the hostile covenant armies were destroyed- leaving those few planets where peaceful Aliens lived. A few of the races were completely wiped out, like Jackals and almost the whole Hunter population. She figured that with a switching of subject, it might cheer her friend up.

"We have thoseâ€¦ things." Elizah scrunched her nose; she could still remember how horrifying the cave was. How those monsters tried to eat at them. How they seemed to breathe and pulse andâ€¦

Pulse.

Elizah got up from her chair and went over to a nearby table.

"What is it?" Aron was surprised. Her topic change obviously wasn't a good one. It made her feel worseâ€¦ she felt her own neckâ€¦ it scared her, too. _What is this Crazy disease?_

"I just hate this!" Elizah slammed her right hand on the table; the old table wobbled like it was going to break. It stood, even beneath the Spartan strength.

Someone knocked on the door. The handle clicked and the door swung open violently but came to a quick stop when it hit the table- it almost closed again. Both the girls were tempted to laugh, but held their stature. The only type of people that would enter that way, were either soldiers or officials. Three men entered the hospital room. Three strangers. Two of them were dressed in green; the third standing in the middle was dressed in blue, adorned with at least three silver stars.

The only thing they saw- were the stars.

"Lieutenant General Phyllis, sir." Aron saluted from her hospital bed; Elizah also scrambled to bring her right hand to her forehead and keep a good posture.

"At ease- I'm here on less formal business, soldiers." Phyllis nodded his head, and the girls relaxed. The men with him were pretty well built, really tallâ€¦ Spartans. Neither Spartan looked familiar. One to his left, had bleached white hair, it was thick and wavy and almost fell over his eyes. His eyes were a grassy green

color.

Elizah saw him, and thought he looked like a Fey, with the way his sharp eyes looked. Elizah stopped herself before she started staring; she knew she stared off too much as is. The one on his right was dark-skinned, black hair, wide nasal bone, and yellow eyes. Aron fell backwards into her pillow. Yellow Eyes. She started to freak out in her head, while outside to everyone else, she started to look relaxed. Maybe a little tired, but relaxed.

The Lieutenant General started to introduce them, first he pointed to the Dark man with yellow eyes. "This is Spartan Campbell, or SL811" Campbell nodded. "This is Spartan Haza, or SL827" Phyllis motioned towards the Fey man. "They're not from around here."

Thank you, Lieutenant General Obvious.

"Soldiers, these are Ravel, or SL845 and Kitsume, or SL821. You twoâ€¦" he pointed to the Female Spartans "Find SL846 and SL823- get them to give these two a tour." The Lieutenant General turned and left, leaving the two new Spartans there with the girls.

"I'll go find them for you." Elizah coughed and then left, leaving the room in an awkward silence. Aron only glared at the two new Spartans. The thought came to her that they were there to replace her and Elizah. It only made sense to her, _why else would they transfer two new Spartans here?_ She contemplated; _No one would _request_ to transfer to this Hellhole._

Campbell took a seat by in one of the chairs against the walls, pretty far away from Aron and Haza. Making it less awkward. Spartan Haza just stood by the door, silently.

Meanwhile, Elizah looked the hallways to find Bant and Kyle. When she finally found the waiting room, she saw Bant. No Kyle anywhere. _Figuresâ€¦_ he's been weird lately_.
>"Where's Kyle?" She took a seat next to Bant, looking at him with a half-smile.<p>

"Dunno" he shrugged "Why?"

"You and him are required to give some fancy-pants tour to a few guys who are newbs to Lacid." She laughed. She hadn't used that term in forever. _Newbs_. To her, it was a funny word.

"Okayâ€¦" They got up and started to navigate back to the Hospital room, getting lost at every other turn. "Who are they?" he asked her. He hadn't really realized it, but she was pulling him by the hand. It was violent, but it was by the hand. That was new.

"Lieutenant General Phyllis called them Haza and Campbell. They have SL-Eight-Hundred tags, so they might have fought in the war." She swiftly tried to get back to the hospital room; she didn't feel like talking anymore, she wanted to have some time alone soon. All by herself she could sort out her thoughts and everything else.

"But they're not from Lacid?"

"That's what I said. Not from Lacid."

They turned a corner, and once again she saw the room number; the room number that she had been in every day for three weeks, awaiting her best friend to wake up. Her condition had been critical, and the Doctors worried. _But everything's okay now_. The door was still open

She almost flung Bant into the room. He tripped as they walked in the door; it made Haza smirk for some reason she could not comprehend. "Here's Bâ€| umâ€| Chloeâ€|." She huffed between breaths. " SL846" she sighed and walked over, plopping herself down in the chair by the bed.

"Chloe?" Campbell snickered, covering his mouth to attempt hiding his obvious laughter; Haza at the door started laughing too.

"Shut up." Elizah looked at them annoyed, a little too loud. "Get to your tour." She looked down at her hand. Bant was tempted to approach her, but at the time it was way too unprofessional. It would just make everything more complicated than it needed to be.

"Yeahâ€|tourâ€|" Bant collected him self and headed for the door "Follow me."

Aron stared as all three men left, she couldn't tell what was up with those Spartans, but she knew she didn't trust either of them...especially the one with yellow eyes.

3. Fire

****Rifle****

****Chapter Three****

Elizah got home that night, locked the door behind her.

Jazz music rang through their apartment- the fireplace was litâ€| she was being expected. The smell of old candles and dust was overcome with the smell of _Grilled Chicken_ and _Marsala_. "You always pick the most stressful daysâ€|" she set down her bag, it had a few journals and pens inside, the type of stuff she carried around those days.

"I just know, huh?" and he did. He always knew the days to cook dinner and play music. Her knew that through all the things that interested her, Music was in the top three. Love and food were in the top Five; warm atmospheres always made her relax.

"Been following me, have ya'?" she laughed.

"You know it." Bant chuckled, they had gone day in and day out to see if Aron was still breathing, through all that, even though she felt lonely, she knew he was trying to keep her from being that.

She couldn't help feeling alone, though, she had felt alone until she had met Aron, her first best friend, when she first entered the Spartans academy. They didn't fight alongside in the war, being part of different squadrons, but Bant had been there. Before long, Bant and her had ended up living together. Neither of them was ever sure

where that came from. He was smart and attractive enough to meet her standards, and she was a mixture of tough and sweet enough to meet his.

Neither of them could pinpoint where the sparks started flying. It could have been when they were first put in that squadron together.

"Hey." He smiled at her, but she only replied a shy "Hi" She was so much more quiet back then, she almost didn't speak to any Males, let alone have any that were her friends—or her genuine friends, at least. One or two chased her tail at one time, but neither of them fit the standard she went by. _Healthy body, smart, attractive enough to look at- I want cute kids, daggummit!_ They had started talking, and before long she was comfortable to talk to him casually.

Eventually, they became friends, and that grew.

"So— what's the food for? It's kind of late for dinner—" she walked into the kitchen to greet him. He was already putting the food in plastic containers. She thought it was funny that he knew she would have eaten out and cooked something anyways.

"You ate on the way here, didn't you?" he was already, packing the food into the fridge before she answered. He knew all too well her reply.

"Yeah—" she pursed her lips and looked to the floor.

"That's okay—" He walked over to her and held her. She liked that, but she was tired and yawned. She broke free and went back into their living room- laid down on the couch and turned off the music with the remote. Stared into the fireplace and all it's dancing magic.

It danced without a tune, without a beat, but to something else. It made it's own beat, chose it's own tune—but it was never to leave its place—and someone else always determined its lifespan. Someone who was bigger than the fire was. When it came down to it, though, the fire would win over its master. If it broke free, the master could do nothing of it—the master might die.

In the end, the puppet would become the master. The used would become the user- but eventually die out after it wrecked everything ever imaginable. After it became free, the world would end. Not only the world of the Ex-master, but also the world of the new master as well, as it died.

"What are you thinking about?" Bant. She didn't notice him kneel in front of the couch; she had been too busy looking at the majesty of flames. She shrugged. For the most part, she wasn't even sure what she was thinking of. It was Poetic—but it was in truth.

"Nothing—"

"You sure?" he looked at her more intently, wanting a real answer, he knew there was one, but he couldn't place it inside his own mind. To him, women were quite difficult to understand, let alone guess the thoughts of. The possibilities were endless, and especially with

Elizah. He tried to lean in, maybe give her a kiss.

She rolled on the couch, so she wouldn't be facing him or the fire anymore. She stared at the back of the couch in silence.

He was confused; he could tell something was up. She never did this before. He felt like an idiot, _I did something wrongâ€| oh God._ He just sat there still for a little. He couldn't understand why she would be such a hypocrite- one second being a passionate girl, the next being distant and staring off into space. She had just walkedâ€|_rolled_ away.

He saw it. He saw how sometimes she shrunk back into that girl she used to be- scared and alone, untrustingâ€| and definitely not one to even talk to him. He sat up and reached out his hand to scratch the top of her head, she had always liked that. Her right hand snapped back at him and hit his wrist, like some wild animal. She turned back to him angry- she was starting to cry.

"Elâ€|" he looked into her eyes, it was almost the only that they could communicate in this mode- eye contact. She had an angry and sad emotion in her eyes, tears were starting to form. That was besides that passionate longing she held, of course.

"You'll get it too." The first tear dripped down on her cheek- its friend followed it to escape from her eye. All the other tears realized the escape route, too, and soon followed.

She abruptly got up from couch and ran to her personal room, slamming the door shut. She always confused him like that, with her conflicting and random emotions. That was something he didn't like about women.

He couldn't hear her silent cries, but he knew they were there. The disease that was going around made her upset, made her untouchable and distant.

"Yeah, well, I'd rather die with you, stupid." He was tempted to yell, but he didn't. He only whispered it quietly to the fireplace as it died.

4. Pry

****I hate how I have to do so much research for this fanfiction. ;A;**

>I have read pages upon pages of Halo Nation on Wikia. I swear; if this doesn't line up with something that is known about Halo1/2/3/ODST/reach/any of the books, please tell me OTL (I mean I haven't had any problems so far I think, but still)**

****Rifle****

****Chapter Four****

That day was the day.

>The day the Planet was to get evacuated.<p>

People had been lined up and examined; it took a week, even with all

of the Doctors and Nurses on Lacid. On that day, everyone had a wristband; it marked you either sick or healthy. The two girls pushed their way through the lines, the scrambling crowds. Sick. Both of them were sick.

They were getting close to the tables, when someone came from an adjacent hallway and forced them out of the crowd. Elizah struggled against him- not to get back in line but to keep from being pushed around. Aron struggled to. They hated to be controlled. He sighed and silently pulled them down the same hallway he emerged from. They turned to see their captor. Bant.

"Bant, what the what?" Aron tried to break free, she slapped Bant, and he let go. They were a good distance from the pushing crowds, now. Both the girls were shocked, and it was evidently displayed on their faces. _What are you doing, Bant?_

"You're not sick citizens." He nodded, his face stern and almost unreadable.

"Yes we-"

"No, you're sick _soldiers_." He did a quick nod. "You can't register as a sick citizen just like _that_." He snapped his fingers. "Follow me." he turned and walked down, farther away from the crowd and turned at the corner ahead. Reluctantly, they followed. They were curious what he meant, where he was going, what them being soldiers had to do with it. He knew they would follow, he made it clear enough, but blurry enough to taint their curiosity. Especially Elizah's, he knew she would follow him, whether she was curious or not.

They followed him a few more turns until they found The Lieutenant General standing alone by the wall; he raised one eyebrow as the three approached.

>"These last two consented, we have a team of six now, sir." Bant nodded at the Phyllis. "I request you let us-"<p>

"You two." Phyllis Squinted "You consented to do this?" he looked at them in interrogation.

Both of them were confused. Neither had agreed to anything, they had been rushed out of the crowd in a windstorm. Tempted down a few hallways and straight to the highest-ranking officer currently on this Planet. They couldn't hesitate. They had no time. Elizah decided that there was only one way to do this- Play along.

"Yes sir, we consent." Elizah nodded, she tried to hide the confusion. She didn't know what Aron did, but she kept her eyes on Phyllis as not to waver. She could only hope that for all of them, that Aron played along too.

"Alright, soldiers. You have permission to investigate; I'll give you access to any information that was obtained beforehand and any research done. I'll change the permissions so you can access it in the UNSC Database tomorrow." The General Blinked once through all of that, and walked away.

Both girls had minds full of questions. _What did we just agree to? What is this? What research? Research what? Why would we need

permission to do whatever we're doing? Why did I just play along to that?_

He expected to get hit with a storm of questions in words, but they both stayed silent. They couldn't decide what to say- so many questions- but which to ask first.

"What?" Aron broke the silence first. She'd be the one to do that. Break silence. Bant had thought Elizah would speak up first; he was almost surprised to hear Aron's voice.

"We're gonna look for the cure. You're part of doing that." Bant smiled.

"You didn't tell us!" Aron yelled, "What if we didn't want to, huh?" she stepped forward in anger.

Pulse.

She grabbed her neck and right shoulder in agony. It had started to spread. Her infection was visibly larger in size, the skin throbbing.

"I know you two better than that, Aron." He looked both of them, in the eye, before helping Aron get to her feet. "You wouldn't just stand by and do nothing."

He was right, too; they _couldn't_ just stand by, and they _wanted_ to do something. They didn't want to be carried off by the crowd to wherever; they wanted to help find the cure. He knew they'd want to help find it. He knew.

"Tomorrow, we gain access to the research facilities, too. I already found a few scientists that are willing to deal with The Flood."

"What are you talking about?" Elizah finally spoke up. He mentioned something about a flood; she wondered about the weather- _did they plan to flood the area? What use would that be? It just doesn't make any sense._

"Ohâ€| uhâ€|" Bant almost fell into a panic, he wondered whether to tell them or not- _what_ to tell them, if anything. They might not exactly like to remember. Knowing them, he thought they might go full-on slaughter revenge on the creatures for making so many bad things happen. "Those creatures from the Artifact Missionâ€| They're called The Flood. They caused the disease."

Once again, the girls both fell into silence. More questions needed more answers- and more answers would make more questions in a never-ending cycle. Elizah thought they'd never understand it, or fully comprehend everything, but her curiosity still raged. Aron could start to fathom what it all meant. The officials _did_ know about it. The Flood. They didn't tell them and sent them on a mission. _Did they know we'd contract this disease?_

"Their not new, but the disease is. The Flood have been around for a while now- even long before the Covenant-Human war." He looked straight at them. His only intent was to tell them the truth- and the only way for them to both understand everything was to keep his face

blank and calm. "It's a parasite that takes over the body."

At first, neither of them could understand what it meant- Aron got it first. It took over the body. It controls themâ€|takes them over. _Those things from the caveâ€|were they once human? Did they live and breathe like we do? The Pry has been spreading and thenâ€|_

"â€|Noâ€|" Aron looked in utter fear and terror. "â€|If we turn into those things you might as well kill us now." She was scaredâ€|but she was serious. She shook her head slowly back and forth, with wide eyes. She clenched her fists by her side over and over again, but she was attempting to hide some of her frustration. Her fear.

"You won't turn into those. Neither of you will, I'll make sure of it." He almost yelled. This time, Bant showed his emotions, he was scared, too- scared for everyone. He couldn't stand seeing his teammates-his friends- act like that- that they had no chance- that there wasn't any hope. All the while hope stood in front of them, out of reach and taunting them. He didn't want anyone to feel like the fate had been sealed. It wasn't a done deal. It was never a done deal. Never.

He saw the weak smile form on Elizah's face, and he was grateful for the support. Grateful that he made her smile again. It had been so long, now, with the disease and crazy things happening. He hoped it wouldn't get any crazier, for their sake.

"Tomorrow, the three of us will access the UNSC Database."

So they waited. No longer as patients to be sent off here and there, but soldiers who would find the problem.

* * *

><p>Elizah sat crisscross on the couch in her apartment, tapping the makeshift computer desk, trying to get a connection. It was her coffee table in her living room holding the computer in place for her. Aron had shown up twenty minutes earlier, with Lunch for everyone- home-cooked fried chicken. The Database always lagged a whole lot- even with the many servers, it couldn't withstand filtering who to allow in and who to block out without making everything super slow. It wasn't the smartest idea for the whole Seventeen Colony planets in the area to share the same main site. She kind of wanted to punch whoever-came-up-with-the-idea right about now.<p>

She had been trying to access it all morning, but it just was like that. _It's good that we at least got access, right? -That this holy crazy stuff was approved._ She fell over, and stretched out, taking up more than all of the room of the couch- being a Spartan, she was too tall.

"Having trouble?" Bant walked passed the living room, busy with other random things.

"Why aren't _you_ the one doing this?" she threw her hands up in the air, but they only came back down and hit her. She groaned in annoyance. She turned her head to the computer. It logged in. It logged in.

"It logged in!" she almost leaped from her place on the couch- it took all she had to land on her feet. The other two rushed from where they were to see- they would have rushed from anything. They dropped everything they were doing- it was too important to miss.

The first button they pressed took long to load, but they all sat, waiting- the next button- the next. They searched the categories frantically- the research they were looking for was somewhere. _Where is it? _They thought it had to be somewhere in the Database. It took awhile for each section, part, category, and page to appear. Each one was a failure. Each one didn't have what they were looking for.

The hope was fading. The future was becoming bleak. Elizah wondered what she could do with her life besides die. _What's the point of trying if the only thing I have to live for is becoming a monster?_

Click.

****UNSC DATABASE FILES****

****FLOOD****

****DATA UNAVAILABLE AT THIS TIME OR RESEARCH IS RESTRICTED
>TRY REFRESHING THE PAGE.**

****RESEARCHERS IN PROJECT HAZARD;****

****KYLE RICHARD SL823
>SAMUEL HAZA SL827
LEE ALVIN SL890
>LA'SHAUN CAMPBELL SL811
JOSHUA LEWIS SL810****

Kyle. Kyle was researching flood. Everyone sat silent. None of them knew Kyle was involved in advanced research. _It must have been why he disappeared so muchâ€| but then whyâ€|_

It made so much sense to Aron, the disappearing, the acting strange, everythingâ€|except the yellow eyes. She couldn't understand what could have been wrong with him that day- what made him throw her helmet out of reach. Hurting her was something he'd never want to do. She slumped over a little. He would never do that to her in his right mind. _His right mind_, she contemplated, _what if he has the Pry? Wouldn't he have told me? No. He wouldn't have. He wouldn't want me to shun him anymore than I already doâ€|_ A ray of sadness shot through her. _I treat him horribleâ€|_

She sat up straight, regaining the posture she lost, trying to keep her calm. It didn't help that she told lies to Elizah about it- her best friend. It drained her to keep the charade going- it was hard to go through something so complicated alone. She had confidence she could do it, but it still just dragged at her. _What am I supposed to do about Kyle? Ifâ€|if it _is_ Kyleâ€|_

And what's the HAZARD? What does it have to do with the flood? Why would Kyle sign up for thatâ€|? The other four namesâ€|does that say Haza and Campbell? The Spartans we met a week or two ago? They worked with Kyle on this? Why is the data unavailable or restricted? What does that mean?

"Soâ€| who's going to ask Kyle for his research notes?" Bant sighed and closed the laptop, everything they needed, was out of reachâ€|or at least within someone Else's reach- Kyle's reach.

Aron almost panicked. _Kyle isn't himselfâ€|orâ€|that person wasn't Kyle. No. That's not Kyle. I know it. It's not. I can't have one of them asking thatâ€| _person_â€| about Kyle. No._

"I will." Aron stood up, and without another word, left.

5. Research

****Rifle****

****Chapter Five****

She searched, asking everyone where Kyle was; she made it appear urgent- so even a liar would tell her the truth. It _was_ urgent- she wanted to find Kyle, the fake Kyle, and the real one, too. She asked anyone she could get a hold ofâ€| anyone who hadn't been evacuated.

She stopped by his apartment, and got out a key. It was on the first floor. She had gotten a key from Kyle but never used it; He insisted she keep it, though. She thought she wouldn't ever need it for anything. She _thought_.

The door unlocked the same way doors always opened, with a click. She made it swing open slow, flipping on the light switch by the door before opening it all the way, stepping in curiously. She had never actually been in his apartment before. _How could I be such a horrid friend? First I let him disappear, I sneak into his houseâ€|_

"_You can come over here anytime, if you ever need anything"_

His words when he gave her the key. She shoved the thought back into the dark recesses of her mind. She had never come over, because she never needed anything from him. _Or did I?_

There was no one there, just an empty Standard Lacid Apartment. A few CD cases here and there. _Who uses CDs anymore?_ They were out of the cases, non-labeled, and covered in a thin layer of Dust. That place was cleanâ€| _surprisingly_ clean. As if someone hadn't lived there in months. It was almost eerie.

There was a Compact Disk was labeled "_Memories_" on the counter, but she decided to ignore it. It was probably something really lame, anyways. There was no sign of Kyle here, so there was almost no point. She stoppedâ€| curious about the disk of sudden. She missed the old Kyle- she thought she'd maybe find a clue, or at least be able to remember him the way he was. The way she wanted to remember him, even though he annoyed her and made her angry sometimes- but even Elizah had those types of times. She grabbed the disk on the counter and shoved it in her pocket.

She locked the door behind her, but she couldn't find it in herself to turn the light off. She couldn't even tell what it was that made her do that. She just did.

Of all the places Klye could be, she wouldn't know where to start.

She found out, eventually, where she would start looking for him, and that was the Research Center. Kyle had been a researcher, after all, so the other man would keep up that lie as well or maybe she would actually find Kyle.

The research center was almost empty. Not as many people rushing about as usual- the healthy ones had all left for the time being; only the sick and the volunteered remained. She walked down a long narrow hall, the entrance, and towards whatever offices there were- maybe Kyle had one. _It would make sense._

A clerk, a sick one, sat at the desk, she looked dopey and red-eyed. She raised her sleepy eyebrows at Aron- a silent question of _Can I help you?_ Aron nodded. "Can you tell me where Kyle Richards Office is? SL823?" the lady clicked and clacked on the keyboard in front of her. She handed Aron a slip of paper with an office number on it. On her way into the office area, she passed someone. Campbell. She caught a glimpse of his yellow eyes for a split second before he was out of her sight. He headed into the bathroom.

She followed the long hallways, following this number pattern and that- looking for where his office could be. When she finally found it, she was surprised to find the door ajar. Someone was inside, at his desk. She peaked through the door, but Haza saw her immediately. "Aron! Hi!" he stood up and waved before falling back down into the office chair- _Kyle's_ office chair. She waved and displayed a small smile. Haza was at Kyle's computer, clicking and typing away.

"I was just-uh- looking for Kyle- have you seen him?" She shrugged and opened the door all the way.

"I think he went to the Bathroom, I'll go get him for you, if you like." He stood up from the desk and brushed himself off. At that point, Aron too thought he looked like a Fairy. Those bright green eyes had a captivation about them- like magic from a fairytale. He passed her in the doorway and she followed.

He went into the bathroom. Thirty seconds later, Kyle emerged.

"Kyle."

"Hm?"

"Will you marry me?" Aron smiled a sweet smile, her cheeks lifted in a cute pink tint. Her shoulders relaxed, her stick figure poised- Her hands clasped together as if to beg. Her blue eyes looked warm and sunny- like a dream. She looked up into his eyes and pleaded.

"I'd Love to-!" he shifted uncomfortably "but we're Spartans- and it's just not the right time right now-!" he looked away; he wouldn't dare look into those eyes. Not when so much was on the line.

"O-Oh-!" She tried to show a fake disappointment before perking up again and smiling brightly, she held her hands behind her back, fidgeting. She was glad she had learned to act; otherwise this might

have been difficult for her. "I'll talk to you later, okay?" her smile could have stretched from ear to ear and made less of a difference.

He was a little embarrassed, it seemed. He scratched the back of his neck and awkwardly looked away again. He was being distant, even on that subject. It was a bad sign, and she could tell. She turned on her heel and skipped off, she didn't want to give that man a single hint about what she knew. She knew he wasn't Kyle- and he could never be. _Then who was he?_

She went home to her apartment, bummed- Just twenty numbers away from Kyle's apartment. She wondered how they were supposed to get anything out of a fake Kyle? How was she supposed to tell anyone about this? _Guess what, Kyle's gone missing, I know because I asked him to marry me. By-the-way Campbell's a fake Kyle and a psycho who tried to kill me._

She sat on her couchâ€¦felt an uncomfortable jabbing in her pocket. The CD.

>She was even more curious, then. A trace of Kyle- Something he left behindâ€¦but what were they memories of? She put the CD in the player, turned on the TV, and sat and waited. One minute- Two- Three, The time passed by with it just on the Menu. It had Pictures of her, Elizah, Bant and Kyle flashing across the jaw was open, she half expected it to be him at five or six- in his Pajamas; something funny or awkward of him at a young age.

She pressed play, and curled into a ball. First it was Christmas, last year, everyone opening gifts. She laughed. Her and Bant had set up a gag gift for Kyle that year- they hid his real gifts under wads of new socks and underwear. Next was everyone watching a scary movie in Elizah's apartment, Aron could only guess that Kyle hid a camera by the TV so he could get everyone's reactions. Aron only laughed more at each memory in the CD- each moment of everyone. Each moment that they'd never have again- a life they could never go back to.

She started to feel sad, she missed the living they did- even as Spartans they had that small bit of free time after the wars. _We used it to the fullest, huh?_

The memories over, the screen turned black. She sat up, "The research" she heard someone say- it sounded familiar- it sounded like Kyle. _Is he back after all of this time? _She wondered.

The voice had rung in her ears like music. She spun around like a hurricane.

To see nothingâ€¦nothing but a black screen with the letters written across it that his voice had spoke: "_The research"_. The research. _The Research!_ She dove for the remote, re-winded it and heard his voice again: The research.

>She pressed the menu button. Went into the scene selection on the old-fashioned CD and went to the one that harbored the words. She got closer to the screen. The chapter was named "Divan".

She had a clue.

She didn't know what the clue meant, but she had one. All that mattered was the clue. It wasn't an English word. It didn't sound

Spanish. She didn't know what to do- whom to ask to translate- who could she go to?

Kyle. _Kyleâ€|why so many puzzles? Why couldn't you have just left your research on the coffee table? Why? It has something to do with one of us, right? All four of us were bi-lingual. We learned a different one just in case. What did Kyle speak again?
>Oh yeah.
French. Kyle spoke Frenchâ€|_speaks_. He _speaks_ French._

She sighed, _it's French for something isn't it?_ _His second language isn't something he told everyone about. _It fits- something only the four of us knew.
>It's probably not French for Office, or Haza would have found the filesâ€|waitâ€|
Why was Haza in Kyle's office?_

Aron got up from the couch, took the CD and put it under some papers in a kitchen drawer. Next, she left the house- back to Kyle's. She unlocked the door. The light was off- someone else had been there. She flipped the switch. The Dusty coffee-tabletop had wipes of fingers on it; the nameless CDs had been moved. She ignored it all, the only thing she wanted was his belongings from his past- his French book- notes- a dictionary- anything. She searched the house for a pile of books or a bookshelf of any kind. Nothing.

Getting desperate, he stepped into the kitchen. A bookshelf resided there. They had paper taped to the back of them and labeled various things. They obviously weren't all cookbooks. She pulled a few out; one, with paper over the spine labeled "_100 yummy recipes" _was actually an annotated encyclopedia. She held it under her arm as she reached for another. "_Soda and Ice Cream_" ended up being a photo album, and "The best of Potatoes" ended up being a book about adding secret compartments and passageways into a house. Only several more sat with the fake titles on the shelf. _Which one would have to do with French?_

"_From croissants to biscuits_" was one to the far left. Obviously, it was code for _French to English Dictionary_. She greedily grabbed it, setting all the other books down to look through this single one. _Divan_. She flipped through the pages, and her eyes scrolled down.

Couch. It meant Couch.

She tried to put all of the books, fake paper backing and all, back where they had been, and left the kitchen. The couch. She examined the couch. Nothing special. She removed the cushions. Nothingâ€|except the springs seemed to be messed up or tampered with on one side- in the middle- where no one would sit- and a small area of square inches.

Silently, she flipped the couch over. There were nails holding in the Fabric; she removed two of them carelessly. There was a box, with a heart painted around the locket, embedded into the couch. She couldn't find out what the heart meant. What? Am I supposed to have the Key to Kyle's heart or something corny like that? She sighed. It's worth a shot. With that, she pulled out the apartment key and tried it.
>Click.
She opened the box to find some small melody lightly playing. It was a light blue electronic music box. Inside was a file-

a file full of notes.

She opened the file and read one;

****UNSC RESEARCH DOCUMENT****

****KYLE RICHARD SL823****

****REPORT ON HAZARD SUMMARY****

HAZARD, is what happens when a GRAVEMIND manifests in a chemical body with similar genetic makeup to a human being. HAZARDS think and calculate; they are strategic and cunning. It is known that one exists on Lacid. Researchers on Lacid are trying, at this current time to locate the being. We have reason to believe that it has been around since _The Great War of Wails_. The reason for this theory would be for it to learn about humans and not only be unidentifiable from real humans, but so that it can find the flaws in the SPARTAN SEVEN program. Furthermore, the method we used to contain the FLOOD for the past three hundred years has become obsolete with the appearance of the HAZARD. We need to replace ARTIFACT with something that can destroy the FLOOD without harming any human life forms. From scans, we have come up with the theory that the HAZARD can shape shift, in a way. We have obtained evidence that indicates that the FLOOD is planning an attack on the human race. We have no time to waste.

I ask that this not be posted in the UNSC Database.

****END NOTE****

She found it. The reports on Flood- it was all there. A small piece of paper dropped out of the folder and onto the floor. She picked it up and read it; two Spartan tags were hurriedly scribbled across it.

_SL811
>SL827

It was Haza and Campbell's Spartan tags.

6. Return

****Rifle****

****Chapter Six****

Once again, the echoing of boots as they marched back to the cave; the slushy mud on the ground covered their boots in a layer of dirt. They were at the cave where all of the confusion happenedâ€|once again. Live flood samples- that was the first thing they needed to grab to get this whole cure thing off the ground.

Bant wondered, to himself only, if it was really all they would need. He had curiosity that maybe there was something more- maybe there was something they were missingâ€|something important. Bant didn't wear armor- no- the glass case to nab a Flood in was heavy enough, so he wore an oxygen mask and light clothes. He was the one who insisted that he'd be the carrier. He had no doubts that he'd be all right if

he did it. He would've worried too much if one of the girls stepped into the cave as defenseless as he was now.

The girls escorted him through the narrow passageway, Elizah in front of him and Aron behind him. Aron, in her same aqua armor, was followed by Haza- the fairy in bright yellow armor. Behind Haza was Campbell, in a deep blue shade. Aron didn't feel comfortable letting the two they knew _least_, leading up the back. For all they knew, they could get stabbed at any moment by the two who trailed along.

The new mission was set: capture a specimen and bring it back; preferably, capture one of the small ones. For one, those would be much more easy to handle. Secondly, the container wasn't all that bigâ€¦ it was about as big as a regular-sized pillow in height. It wasn't wider than an adult's arm length, but close to that circumference.

Their boots, once again, experienced the sickly sound of the flesh like ground and horror surroundings. It had been over a month since they last were here- in the cursed grounds- where the Pry originated. Suddenly, one or two of them began to think. _The Pry wasn't around before that missionâ€¦_

The few that did think, of the group, if the mission caused it; if maybe it had something to do with how they awakened the poor souls.

>Maybe it had to do with the fake Kyle, the one that only Aron was aware of. _Maybe it had to do with the artifact, or the fact that we were attacked orâ€¦_

There was a slight thumping from the deep parts of the cave. They all cocked back their guns, and, as if on queue, Flood appeared from the depths. Swarming in a nasty way. The only thing the Spartans could smell was the cleanliness of the Oxygen and Hydrogen in their helmets. Just _imagining_ the smell of what this place truly was like, made them cringe. Whilst the creatures hopped and bounced by the millions into that one part where the Spartans stood ground.

Unintelligibly, Haza mumbled something. Aron wished she had caught it. Campbell, with a sniper got to work eliminating the numbers from afar. Elizah would've been picking them off, too, but she was afraid to bring any modded guns with two soldiers she didn't know too well. Aron could care less; Her sword was going to make her this time, not break her. Elizah used a revolver- another favorite of hers; Bant loaded twin shotguns; Aron had a shotgun, too, but her sword was kept in close reach.

The things crawled out in vicious speeds- from the ceiling, floor and both sides of that one opening they emerged. They flew, slimy root-like arms open, into the air. Some got shot down, while others moved closer. For a few minutes, they held off the popcorns around them. For a few minutesâ€¦they stood unscathedâ€¦for a few minutes.

From the over caverns and cave lead-offs, more crawled out. Not popcorns. Not smaller flood; the other ones. The ones they had met last time.

>Aron shivered. This time, each one was more sickening- the fact that

once a human harbored and controlled that body- the fact that they still moved and breathed in death. They still fought strong with what was controlling them. Were they once soldiers, too? Did they ever fall in Love? Did they ever even get a chance to live their lives before it was snatched away from them? Pry. Was it was pried from their fingers?

She hadn't realized how close the monstrosities had gotten to them. She hadn't realized she was the only one not shooting them. She hadn't realized that she had dropped her gun to the ground.

>She snapped.
Getting her sword, she broke out of the group. It glowed longer and fuller through her grasp than it ever did before. She went to the side, out of the line of fire, and waved to the creatures in taunt. They took the bait, while she hid her sword behind her back. They lunged at her in a rage that only a wild beast could generate.

>That was when she became one-hundred-percent sure.
She could kill them without a second thought.

She wouldn't have to feel guilty for killing a beast of the land: a beast of the flood. The part that was once human was no longer there. The blue slashed through the air and the monsters fell to the ground in sets of two.

"Charlotte!" one seemed to scream.

>"Charlotte! Why did you leave me?" it's human head writhed and thrashed, screaming in its insanity over and over again. "Charlotte! Charlotte!" Its cries were inhuman and distorted- by the cave and the beast's form.<p>

That was it. Her eyes widened. It was human, it still cried almost like one. She was busy staring at the poor creature at her feet- the one scrambling for some form of life. The one crying out for his dear Charlotte, his life was taken from him.

Aron just stood there, almost lifeless. She could see something going on out of the corner of her eye. She couldn't tell what it was- a monster lunging for her- someone running towards her.

>It was both.<p>

When another monster fell, in front of her, she returned to the reality she came from. Elizah was standing next to Aron, her revolver smoking of fresh gunpowder.

>The monster that was wailing for a Charlotte finally stopped moving when the second one fell atop it.<p>

"I know what it seems likeâ€|but don't let them get to you." She grabbed Aron's shoulders and faced her so they could make eye contact. She gulped looking into Elizah's eyes- full of pain and angerâ€|but also that gaze of a friend- the friend who just saved her from thinking.

>Yes, from thinking.
She needed to stop thinking about it, and take action- like the soldier she used to be- like the soldier that she, in that next moment, became once again: the perfect soldier.

"A little help over here!" Bant yelled to the girls. The hoard of Flood was making their way towards the group of three men easier now, quicker. Elizah turned to see. They could really of used her help about then.

"Aw, El, Bant's all lonely without you." Aron laughed; she picked up her sword again, and slashed another flood near them. Her precision, accuracy, and speed were back again. "I think I got it over here." She smiled.

"I know you do." Elizah clicked her revolver again, and made her way back to the center of the room. Fighting back the flood, keeping her Bant safe. _They have a good chance at happiness;_ Aron whispered to herself, _I hope to God that Kyle's still alive. I'll kill him if he isn't._

More flood, more shooting, more hack-and-slashing. It raged on. Aron kept at the creatures, even through their distorted human-like attributes.

Aron looked over every now and then, checking on her teammates.

>Whether she liked it or not, she separated herself from the group. Not just on this mission—but for the past few months. The separation was supposed to come to an end eventually. She needed someone to help hold her up, even a soldier like her, even someone as violent and sometimes as heartless as she was.
She needed her friends.
>She needed to tell them.
She needed to tell them everything.

Why was she holding this all in, she wondered. She always saw Elizah as a person she could trust— even in times like this. Elizah was never one to shout secrets in the streets, and Aron knew that. Still, something kept her from saying anything. She regretted it now, because if she'd die, no one would ever find out what happened to Kyle. No one would ever find him and save him from wherever he was. _He's probably up in a tower somewhere_, she thought, _with a dragon guarding him_.

No. She wouldn't die. She was the only one that could keep Elizah thinking straight, the only one who could find Kyle, and the only one to slap Bant if he did anything wrong. Her friends needed her too, and it fueled her rage to survive— her rage to protect. The swinging of sword became more violent, but still controlled.

>Pulse.

Elizah shot and reloaded, shot and reloaded, shot and reloaded. The only thing she could do. She wanted to protect Bant—to protect Aron—to make everyone happy. Even through all her life, she wanted to stop being a people-pleaser—but she'd never stop. She could do it all her life; it was a bad habit, sure. The difference and decision she made, though, was to people-please and protect the people she loved most. She planned to stick to it. She couldn't help but glance over from time to time to see Aron, making sure she didn't need help.

Her only friends left, now. She had to keep them safe. She didn't care what happened besides that. She pulled out her shotgun and loaded it; she shot with both hands, the shots were quick, but aimed with accuracy. She turned her head towards Aron again, but she dropped her shotgun. Her revolver in tow, she ran.

Bant loved people. Especially her. Her didn't want anyone to get hurt. Everyone had been hurt enough, especially her. He couldn't let

her die- not now and not ever. He got the container and opened it, "Let that small one through- shoot the others!" he yelled through his mask. One little popcorn flood lunged and it fell into the container.

>The lid was screwed on before the thing could recuperate, it was dazed and tried to jump all around, but the container didn't shatter. The container was made strong- almost stronger than a Spartan's armor; it had no cracks for the thing to slip through. He had to do this- to save her- to save everyone. He didn't want her to turn back into what she used to be. He didn't want her to give up on life. He'd fix it. He'd fix everything.<p>

He saw Elizah's shotgun drop to the ground as he was reloading. He looked up; she had ceased fire. She was running. She was running towards Aron.

>He felt it, the slow motion panic setting in. The way Elizah was running, something was wrong. He looked aroundâ€|he couldn't see Aron. He saw a blue glow over there- a blue glow clattering to the ground.<p>

Screamingâ€|

â€|_There was so much screaming._

The situation set in, and he abandoned Haza and Campbell. His only concern was the two people he knew. Haza yelled at him, but he didn't care, he kept running. He would help Elizah and her best friend. He had no armor- just an oxygen mask. He had no protection; he had no knowledge, no expectation.

>The flood had ammunition. He didn't see itâ€|he didn't hear itâ€|he felt it as it hit him in the shoulderâ€|one shotâ€|it burned like fire, it ripped through his skin.<p>

Aron was screaming. Gripping her shoulder and neck. It was doing that thing again- that thing that felt like she was bursting out of her own skin. Like she was being shot and stabbed a million times in the same place- over and over. She wanted it to be gone. She wanted to pulsing and throbbing to stop. She dropped her sword. He heard screaming and yelling.

Am I screaming?

Or is someone else?

Bant could no longer keep conscious. One bullet was enough; he could see them on the ground, while his eyes got weird. He could see colors that he thought didn't exist. He could feel himself falling to the groundâ€|or was he already there?

He could see the blue glow as he blacked out.

She could see the blue hair as she went into a deep sleep.

7. Infinite Loop

****Rifle****

****Chapter Seven****

At first it was darkness.

Then he was in a hallway- it looked familiar- the hallway of the academy. Usually, the academy never held dances, but it was a special celebration to honor some guest from far away.

She ran up to him, nervous, he had never seen her this shaken up before. It was almost improper: her: not the top of her class but not the lowest either. She had a huge interest in heavy artillery: Grenade launchers and Rocket launchers- anything that used fire and explosions.

"Soâ€¦ you have a dateâ€¦?" she shifted uncomfortably from heel to heel, her shoulders slouched a little. Avoiding eye contact. Usually, she'd look straight into anyone's eyes- but not now.

"Hmâ€¦ not really." He shrugged.

"Could I go with you? I-â€¦I meanâ€¦if you wouldn't mindâ€¦" She bit her lip and looked away, her braces were visible. Someone her age with braces was kind of embarrassing, but it did show off her favorite color: Orange.

"Wellâ€¦sure" He shrugged again, this time with less emphasis, he looked straight at her.

"R-really?" She perked. Her shoulders held back up, her eyes sparkled a bit, and she finally looked up into his eyes- full of hope and wonder.

"Of course." He smiled. Who knew, he was about to ask her the same thing. She had started to walk away in the sunlight; he saw the bright orange bow tied in her brown hair. It was a strange thing for someone who love explosions so much.

>"I'll see you there, Ravel?" He turned towards her again, putting another textbook in his locker.<p>

"You can call me by my first name." she turned around; face blank and stared at him.

"I'll see you there, Elizah?" He grinned.

"You bet." She smiled the brightest smile she had ever smiled at him, it was probably also because of the sunlight let in by the windowsâ€¦or maybe it wasn't.

* * *

><p>It was dark outside. The wind blew in a line- never stopping or starting again- but continually going on and on. She didn't like heels, he could tell in the way she pursed her lips when she walked.<p>

Her fingers running up and down her arms in the cold, her small goose bumps evident even in the night. She wore a sleek black dress that shaped her all to well.

_Is it just me or did herâ€¦uhâ€¦getâ€¦

>Stop it! Stop thinking about that you man-whore!
_He hit himself in the forehead. _What am I doing? I haven't known her long enough to

think about thinking about thinking about that!_

She had red ribbons tied in her hair that blew in the night wind.

>The walked in the building together, hand in hand.
Maybe that was the first spark, maybe not.

The party was very formal- not much dancing- but the academy students referred to it as a dance. The food was formal. The Champaign was formal.

>Everything was formal.
The special guest that they welcomed was dressed in a white tuxedo- a black necktie neatly hung around his neck- like a professional person dressed him up. The name blurred, was he the only one that didn't hear it? No one else flinched. The world was spinning a little; it all seemed surreal for a moment.

Everything went back to normal, and he immediately forgot about the lack of normalcy. He drank some Champaign- but not too much. He had to drive back to his apartment later. He felt strange- was he drunk? Or was something else going on? He felt like he was watching a movie of himself. He could feel himself above the party and above the crowds.

Normal again. He sighed, and again he forgot about what had gone on.

>He saw Kyle from across the room and waved. Kyle ignored him.
No, that's not rightâ€|he was supposed to wave back.

Kyle was chasing tail- or more accurately- he was chasing Miss Kitsume. He followed that girl around like a lost puppy. Bant didn't see her as anything special- she was a sharp shooter, real accurate, but she was always distant and sometime rude and mean. He couldn't understand why Kyle didn't want someone who was sweetâ€|

>â€|Like Elizah. He pushed the thought away, what was he thinking?

>Kyle never cared about appearances, though; he just always cared about Kitsume.
Maybe he's on a better track than I am.

He sipped. Even though he entered with Elizah, he couldn't find her. _Where'd she go? _He looked around the crowds, he couldn't see any red bows hopping, jumping, skipping or dancing. He sighed. _Maybe she's in the bathroom or something._

Glass still to his mouth, he turned around and almost jumped backwards. Behind him, now blushing pink- was the girl with red ribbons. Her face had as much shock as his.

Did she know it was me she was approaching? Why is she blushing?

"Are you crazy? I almost spilled this all over myself!" he scolded her, throwing her a confused look. I held the Champaign glass up towards her, so it was at her eye level. Her face went back a few inches. She had a huge bubble of personal space obviously.

"I-â€|I'm sorry!" She covered her hands over her mouth, and looked down at her feet. She blushed even more. She looked worried and almost upset.

Was it because I scolded her?

He sighed and brought the Champaign glass back to himself. It shimmered.

>"It's okay, I'm sorry" he rubbed his forehead.<p>

She looked back up again, her curious brown eyes dancing back and forth across the room. She smiled and looked at him again "Maybe you need some fresh air?" Without his reply, she pulled him by the arm towards the front door. He almost struggled against her at first, but then he decided to go with her outside. Maybe there was a logical reason to it, maybe there wasn't. He was curious.

The doors opened silently and they slipped outside-the cool air bombarded them again.

"So" it's cold, right?"

"Yeah."

"What do you think of the honored guest?"

"hm" he seems nice, but maybe a little fake behind that smile of his." He shrugged. It was the answer she was looking for- an answer with honesty. An answer that wasn't afraid to be spoken.

"What about the Champaign?"

"Pretty nice" have you had any?" he shrugged and looked at her again, she just stood still, her face in blank expression.

"I'm younger than you are." She pursed her lips.

It threw them into a silence. He wanted to say something more, but he didn't know what to say. It wasn't what she said that caused silence. They seemed to run out of conversation- but something was on her mind- something she was fighting against. They could hear the Jazz-like music that played from inside, which made it almost serene to out there in the freezing weather.

"You've been acting different lately" She avoided eye contact. "I just want to know if it's because I'm annoying or because I'm weird" She stared at her hands- popping her fingers one by one- not to intimidate- but to distract herself.

"Y-" he tried to speak, but she cut him off.

"I mean" It's okay" nobody really likes me" Her eyes looked shiny, even from her profile view he had, he could tell she was gathering tears from some unknown corner of her being. He had never seen her this sad before- even though she always seemed a little sad.

"You're only annoying and weird when you talk like that!" He blurted out; it was a little too loud and caught both of them by surprise. She straight at him with wide eyes- caught in the same frozen gaze. She didn't move.

"You're my friend." He wanted to say, it was what he said in his

memory, but his words were caught in his throat. Words wouldn't work anymore, somehow. Her face still frozen- it was as if time itself froze. He felt light-headed.

Something was wrong. Her pause should have only been for but a few seconds. She screamed and pointed behind him. He saw blood dripping from her mouth. She had knives protruding from her neck. Her head started to hang limply to her side-but she was still alive somehow. Still moving undead like a flood. _This wasn't what I remembered- this wasn't happening- this didn't happen!_

He turned around to where she was pointing to- he saw Kyle and Aron, covered in flood, morphing into creatures unknown. He turned back to Elizah, who was still screaming- somehow she maintained the same pitch and squeal as her mouth closed and flipped into an eerie smile that literally stretched from ear to ear in sharp, pointed teeth. Her eyes turning red- her hair caught in some strange hue between brown and green, her neck twisting like an owl's and wrinkling in circles.

He stepped back, terrified. He bumped into Aron and Kyle, and their arms sunk into his back. He couldn't tell whose hand it was that went through his neck and through his skull to through his cheek to cover his mouth. Elizah's skin bubbled like Flood as she loomed into some ridiculously tall creature. Her smile and eyes still stuck on her face as her hands stretched into long and sharp knives.

He closed his eyes as she swung at him. Once again, he felt away from it all- as he saw himself die.

His eyes opened. He was panicking, sweating.
>Why would a simple nightmare scare me that bad?

He looked up; there was a white room around him. He could've sworn he saw someone leaning over him_â€|Blue hairâ€| Elizah?_
>Yellow eyesâ€|

â€|_Noâ€|not Elizahâ€|_

Then it all went darkâ€|and it looped- the circumstances and setting getting worse. He was in a dark room alone again.

This time, he was at home.

>He circled the rug, and no matter how he wanted to stop, he couldn't- he circled the rug. He was a ten-year-old boy- walking around a rug. Stuck in infinite motion.
He heard a door slam, but he kept walking.

>Elizah walked in as a young girl- or at least, what he imagined she looked like as a young girl. She had long hair.
Why did he imagine that of her?

She giggled as his mom walked in and greeted her.

>She drew a gun.
Elizah shot his mother in the forehead.

Elizah shot herself through the ear.

Then Elizah shot him in the neck- still giggling- still squirming on the floor half alive.

>Her giggles echoed a thousand times as she created more. The floor turning red, his mother wouldn't move, and he could feel the pain

burning in his neck as he lay on the floor. He couldn't scream, move, or speak.<p>

His limbs detached themselves from him and circled around the red carpet, while his half-lifeless body lied in the middle.

His mother was crying, Elizah was laughing- it was all echoing through the house like a huge cave. Elizah shot his mother again, and she screamed out in pain.

>He tried to move, he tried to do something.
His mother moved up from her red spot in the floor, and wobbled over to him.

"Why won't you help me?" she screamed. She grabbed him by the neck and shook him- shook him until he could feel the bullet bouncing around more inside his neck. His mother clawed and tore at his flesh. She was strangling him.

Elizah fired again.

His mother's blood landed on him and she screamed in agony. Elizah just laughed louder to every scream emitted._ Is she saving me? No. She shot me. She's laughing._

It was white again, then black.

Alone? No. Something's going to happen again.

Something happened again.

Each time, more people he loved died before his eyes- more people he looked up to.

A burning building collapsing on top of him- He could feel his skin burning in the flames. He could feel pain that should have killed him already. His shoulder burned the worst.

White- Dark- new place- new time- new age- new horrors- new people dying.

>Each time in the white room he fought to stay awake.
After many tries, it finally worked. He was awake.

>Or am I still dreaming?

>His eyes adjusted and he sat up. He was in a bed somewhere. It was too dark to tell where.
He couldn't tell where he was anymore.

>His shoulder still hurt- burned- was it from the fire dream?<p>

Or am I still dreaming?

He fell back into a pillow; he didn't expect one to be there, honestly. He saw her sleeping in a chair by the wall, her blue hair shadowing her face. He couldn't remember when she first dyed it. He smiled.

>Everything is okay, he told himself.

Or am I still dreaming?

He drifted back into sleep, which only brought back new nightmares.

8. Second Loop

****Rifle****

****Chapter Eight****

At first it was darkness.

Then she was in a hallway- the academy. _How did I end up here? Where was I before here? _Why_ am I here?_

She turned. She saw someone familiar approaching her- it was _Kyle_ again- he wouldn't stop following her. She rolled her eyes and returned to her locker. Taking out textbook upon textbook from her locker. She ignored him. She knew what he wanted- especially this time.

"Soâ€¦ you're going to that celebration thing?"

"Every student is required to."

"Ohâ€¦wellâ€¦I'll see you there."

That was it. She didn't expect it, but it was like that. He didn't ask her to go with him.

>She was curious, and in confusion she watched him start to walk away. He was going to ask her, he was, she could tell.<p>

"Well?" she yelled at him, and he stopped.

>"Don't you have anything to ask me?"<p>

"Wellâ€¦ only if you'd want to go with meâ€¦"

"No! You Jack-wagon!" she slammed her locker shut and walked the other way. Why _would_ she go with him? He wasâ€¦Kyleâ€¦Annoying Kyle. She didn't want to go with anybody. She hated formal events where people paired up. She thought they were stupid, useless, whatever. Why would she want to dance when she could be training? A war could break out at any minute between any two factions. So why bother with something so useless as dancing?

She would go and honor the guest, sure- but she was leaving after that. Nothing more to stay for- she wasn't old enough to drink the Champaign- and she wouldn't risk the disrespectful act of drinking cider in their midst. Her, the most accurate student in the establishment, drinking Cider and Dancing! What an undignified time.

* * *

><p>Eventually, the party came to be- she sat quiet in the back- in a black dress that went past her heels. She was trying to avoid being seen by Kyle. She wore her hair in in a bun. It was no use, though, Kyle saw her.<p>

She stood up and in a quick pace, entered the dancing crowd; Escape was all that she needed; escape. She quickened her pace even more. She didn't remember this part happening- the music slowed- the dancers slowed. Everyone but her was in a slow motion. She wondered if Kyle had been slowed, too. She turned around and he was still

chasing her at full speed. She pushed past the crowds of people and outside.

This wasn't how it happened, though.

She felt like she wasn't herself anymore- like she had no control- like she was watching herself. It had to be a dream.

She went out the double-door entrance into the night air. It was warm. It wasn't supposed to be warm- she could remember how her wrists and cheeks felt that night. It wasn't supposed to be warm. It was supposed to be freezing cold- a chilly day in October. It wasn't cold.

She turned around to see Kyle following her, still, he ran towards her. She stopped. This was where she met Elizah- the scared little girl. Elizah had just made her first friend- Bant. Aron and her would become best friends. They would graduate together, joke together, watch old movies, and practice using lethal weapons. It didn't happen. She didn't understand why. Elizah pulled a gun at pulled one, too. She turned and saw that Kyle pulled one- so she pulled her own. So many unnecessary firearms- loaded and pointed in a memory that didn't exist. She cocked back the gun.

It didn't load; She didn't have any ammo; it was suicide to do anything but hold up her hands in surrender or bluff. She bluffed.

>What are they doing?

>She gulped and turned her gun at Kyle. Only then did she realize the weapons that everyone drew.
Why does everyone have a simple handgun?

She didn't stand down. She kept her pistol poised. Any second could cost her life.

>She felt above it all, again. It was like watching herself act it all out- a scene that never really recorded in the banks of her memory- a nonexistent sequence. Her hand flinched and shook, moving from pointing at Kyle to pointing at herself.<p>

All in sudden- it loaded with ammo. She shot herself. She could hear it echoing off the building, her friends laughing. I shot myself I really just shot myself.

>She could feel the pain in her head. Everyone else shot her.
Kyle shot her leg, bant shot her arm, and Elizah shot her in the shoulder. She could feel every shot and hear it echoing sickly as it bounced off the trees.

She could feel herself bleeding, he friends laughing at her- she held her ears to block the noise, but it sounded through her hands. Her hands pulsed, then, and she brought them to her face to look at them. They were covered in Pry. She turned to her friends- they had the Pry all over them and resembled zombies- and then they morphed into the crazy human-like flood from the cave.

They closed in on her, her blood gluing her feet to the ground, as she watched from the clouds- her friends devour her. Her chest shot pains through it. She felt like her physical heart was exploding. She could see her flesh being ripped as she watched it. She yelled. She couldn't make any sounds- it was all silent except for the sounds of her dying- the moans of the flood; The horrifying sounds of her skin

being ripped from her bones.

White. Blank. Black.

>She was in a dark room, it seemed. She sat up from where she was laying- her brain still fuzzy and nauseating- her body was still aching from the last nightmare- Her thoughts still spinning from the fake memories of her sleep.
Am I still dreaming? Where the gunshots real?

>It felt like it, to her, at least.<p>

She got up from where she was- a white room in a black lighting. She opened the door and stepped out. She saw a creature outside of her door. It hissed. It was tall and built like a human- but it was green and brown and oozed from it's strange claws attached to its arms. The claws resembled hands.

This is my dreamâ€|so I can control it.

She pointed her hands like a fake gun, curling her fingers to interlock with each other, then whiplashed them upward "Bang!" she yelled. The monster fell to the ground and twitched. She chuckled and marveled at her dream powers- maybe she could control it after all- no more nightmares.

_So I can kill anything with my hands, eh? I should probably get a real gun anywaysâ€|

>â€|one with ammo.

There was a room adjacent to the one she was in. She passed the creature that struggled on the ground and entered it. Elizah and Bant sat inside- Elizah in a chair and Bant in a hospital bed. _Is that where I am? The Hospital?_

>She feared they would eat her again if she woke them up, so she was careful to avoid making sounds or getting too close to them.<p>

She snatched Elizah's purse from underneath the chair and took the pistol from it. _This is a dream- she won't need it anyways. Why was she carrying a purse?

>Ohâ€|rightâ€|to not freak out citizens with weaponry.

>She turned on her heel, neglecting to put Elizah's purse back from the center of the room to under the chair where Elizah sat.<p>

She checked it for ammo as she left the Hospital Room.

>At least twelve rounds were already loaded, and it had an extra cartridge taped to the handle. I guess she didn't want to lose her extra ammunition.

>The creature was gone when she got back into the hallway, but she figured that was how dreams worked- always morphing into something else and changing even when you're looking.<p>

Groggily and wearily, she strolled the halls until she found the exit. The halls seemed longer to her- more confusing.

>She found a transportation system, but the sounds around her sounded off.
â€|Floodâ€|

>â€|In the city.<p>

She turned, a few popcorns were scattered here and there around her.

>She pulled out the pistol she took from Elizah and shot them-
nothing big.

>She shrugged and used the method of transportation she was accustomed to.<p>

Apartments.

>On the way there, there seemed to be flood in the streets- Flood everywhere.
She had to shoot a few of the little demons before she got to an apartment.

>It wasn't her apartment.
She wondered what she was doing there.

>She opened the door with a key she had.
She didn't know where she was.

She locked the door behind her. She didn't want any flood getting in. She almost wanted to plop down on the couch she saw- she felt tired for a dream. She dropped the metal gun in the floor and it fell with a _clang_- even on the carpet. She didn't bother to turn the lights on- she thought nothing was going to happen to her. She waited, expecting the nightmare part to happen soon but it didn't.

Her eyes in the darkness, scanned around. She still didn't recognize anything. The media devices were out of place- or where they? She wondered if the original owner had made it that wayâ€|or if there was something behind it. She considered the fact that maybe someone forgot to put it back. Maybe someone was hiding something.

She moved the media things farther towards the couch- giving her enough room to crouch behind it. She felt around the wall with the hands- no secret compartments or anything.

>Why was she searching for a secret in a house she knew nothing of?
She looked at the ceiling above where the media devices should have been placed- but it didn't make any sense to her. The only thing that made sense was the floor. She scraggily moved her fingers around where the carpet ended- it was unknown to her what she was looking for, but she looked anyways.

The carpeting was loose.

She pulled it up with ease- it had obviously been moved multiple times- who knows when that truly happened. She found a hard stone door underneath- a trapdoor with a sterling silver handle that led to _who-knows-where_. She pulled on the door- it had been left unlocked._ It was quite a wide opening in the ground- how was it so well hidden? She held onto the stable parts of the stone as she slipped herself inside.

It was damp and cold- torches were lit.

>She had a feeling that the nightmare part was about to hit her.
It smelt of ashes, mold, and something she couldn't identify-waste maybe?

>It was dusty.
She heard the ringing of chains- clashing together- as some poor creature moaned in agony. She couldn't really see a whole lot in the stone cave. There were two passageways she could go- right or left. She saw a faint green or blue glow from the Left- so she wanted to take it safe.

>She figured right was right. Aron, taking the right passage, was bombarded, as the most horrid of the smells grew stronger. A short distance down the passageway, another torch was lit by a figure engulfed in chains. The chains continued to rattle.<p>

She could feel it even worse now, a sense of fear, goose bumps. She

tried to remind herself that she was a soldier- that she had nothing to fear.

>Unless it's more floodâ€|
_Upon getting closer, she was rubbing her hands up and down her arms.

>Was she feeling apart from the scene again? Or was it the smell? She gulped.
Was something bad about to happen?

She got closer to the figure. She examined it.

>It was human.
He had dark hairâ€|a horrid case of the Pryâ€|

>His eyes had dark circles under them, his shoulder and half of his bare chest was covered in Pry. He had been infected for a long time. He might have had muscles- but they were out of practice and were beginning to fade. It was obvious now; he was a Spartan.
She didn't have to recognize him or identify him.

She knew who it was.

She stumbled backwards, and felt a pain in her headâ€| a stone? A tool? A weapon? The Pry?

A flash of white, a flash of Black- she saw herself dying there. She felt away from the situation againâ€| her head was bleedingâ€| she died while he sat chained to the wall- doomed. The nightmare part had occurred.

A flash of white occurred which was followed by a flash of black.

>Her nightmares looped.<p>

9. Artifact

****Rifle****

****Chapter Nine****

She awoke to cold, against her cheek. Her fingers stretched and curled in and out- unaware of what they were searching for. Her eyes fluttered open, revealing white all around her- her hair blurred with the vision- quite an array of color.

>The floor.
She was on the floor.

Her eyes focused more to see the definition between her hair and the tiles.

>Blue. She wondered how long it's been blue. She was the old her again for a second- afraid of everything- unaware of everything- alone. Reality hit her hard and fast- her hair had been that way for at least a year-and-a-half. She had Bant and Aron and Kyle. Friends.<p>

She craned her head around. She couldn't fathom, at first, how she ended up there. She looked around a little as she raised herself with her arms from the white tiles- her old bag was sideways- its contents scattered on the floor. Loose copper change shined with the dull lights above- her wallet halfway escaped- and some gum fell out, too. She reached and gathered everything. Her eyes trailed the room, she saw Bant asleep in the hospital bed- he had always been a heavy sleeper. She smiled.

She saw the chairs behind her and concluded that that was originally where she was sleeping. She must have gone down and taken her purse with her.

Her stomach started to rumble. She hadn't eaten in quite awhile- and it wasn't healthy with some one who spent their energy so much the day or so before.

>She rummaged around in her purse- trying to find once again those copper coins- sure a vending machine or cafeteria of sorts was present in the buildingâ€|If there was anyone to restock andor serve at such Job anymore- with the evacuation and such.

Her bag seemed quite a bit lighter than usual, but she was too hungry to question it.

>My gun's missingâ€|that's oddâ€|noâ€|I forgot it at homeâ€|now I remember.

>She found the copper coins and stepped from the room.
After trudging the hallways for what seemed to be forever, she stumbled across a waiting room.

>Haza was there, sitting in a chair. He looked sad- maybe depressed. His bright green eyes just fixed on the carpet while he frowned.<p>

She sat down across from him, ignoring her hunger.

>"Sup?" She tilted her head and smiled at him. Usually Elizah would be afraid of talking to people. She wasn't all that bright and people usually didn't like her. She was usually really quiet around men, too, because she was a little afraid of them in general. For one, though, she couldn't resist trying to brighten someone's day- she liked miracles- the miracle of a smile was one that she believed in.<p>

He shrugged and shook his head, sighing. Something really ate at himâ€| what was it?

>"I'm scared."<p>

She was surprised- a man admitting fear- a Spartan admitting fear was something she had not seen but once or twice in her entire career. Most of the times, it was Bant- some missions scared them both. Only a few times was he able to admit it.

She frowned. "Why?"

He brought his head up and looked her in the eyes. She could see the fear this time- it resonated and reflected that emotion- but that single emotion. Elizah was frozen in place- awaiting his answer- she could barely blink when staring into eyes like that. She felt a pang in her chest; jealousy- she wanted eyes like that- bright and reflective of emotion. His eyes were like gemstones and she was able to feel, when looking into them, a sense of spells and magic.

>Omygosh, he's the prettiest man I've ever seen.

"I found something outâ€|that scares meâ€|"

She stayed silent, listening intently and still just as frozen.

"I need to talk to you and Bant." He breathed heavily. He was nervous and wiped his palms on his jeans. It had to be bad. "Is he awake yet?" he looked away for a second then straight back at her. It froze

her again, his eyes. _What was he looking at?_

She stood out of her chair- pulling away from his pretty and mystic gaze. It was difficult for her- she loved eyes- especially pretty ones. Her stomach started to call out to her, though, and she had better things to do than stare into the eyes of a stranger all day.

Haza stood as well. He hoped Bant was awake so he could tell them something. Something important.

"He's not awake, and I need something to eat." She finally informed him of the current situation before trotting off towards whatever vending machine was nearest.

"How long have you been here?" she asked him, turning her head back, almost to catch a view of him.

"All night. Campbell's been here all night, too."

"Should I get Aron, too?"

"We'll tell her later, Bant first- we probably wont be able to get them both in the same room with their injuries anyways."

* * *

><p>"I did some research." He kept his green eyes once again to the floor, his bleach hair falling over his eyes- still as shaken-up as earlier.<p>

"And?" they both waited- anticipated-what he was going to tell us. It seemed to stress him out quite a bit- of course that only aroused their curiosities.

"It's about the first mission you went to that cave." The first mission; the cave with flood; the first mission itself being mentioned was a lot to take in. It was where it all had begun- the flood- the hurt- and maybe even the Pry. They waited in silence, still for what was about to be given to them. Satisfaction? Or guilt? Which was to be obtained from these bits and pieces of information?

"The artifact is made of a substance commonly referred to as Hypothrinium. It attracts Flood. According to our research, we have a new artifact sealed off somewhere that's even stronger- the artifact that was supposed to be placed _in_ the cave. Somewhere, we think, it was lost in translation that we needed to place the new artifact and you were only told to remove the old one." He seemed to be shooting at words- every one sure hit them like bullets. Another mistake in the government- another mistake that cost many lives. He gazed up at them and saw the full-blown impact of his sentences.

"So why don't we place this new artifact in its rightful place?" It made sense to her- _why hasn't it been put there already? What is wrong with these people?_

"It went missing at the time of the evacuation." He looked down again; His grassy eyes returning to that peaceful sorrow, his thumbs seemed to wrestle with each other in a choppy anxiety. There was

silence before anyone dared to ask him anything- the answers were too much to fear. Elizah gulped and leaned back further in her chair, eyeing the textures upon the ceiling.

"Could we get more?" Someone finally voiced. The fact didn't matter whom, though, it was Elizah herself, but the fact that mattered is that someone worded that question in words- the question that was on everyone's minds.

"Hypothrinium is actually not present on this planetâ€¦ and traces back to the Halos." Haza hesitated on that last part- the Halos.

"The Halos?" Bant raised an eyebrow, the most he had known about the Halos is what he was told- the covenant tried to destroy the universes with it and the flood may or may have not existed at that time. He wondered why it was even relevant, the Halos, as to how they were to rid themselves of the Flood and the Pry.

"The government has kept quite a lot from usâ€¦ It's been around since before the flood- but it was first found on the Halos a long time ago- scientists have no idea how it got there." It seemed to make some sort of sense to Haza, but almost no sense to Bant or Elizah. They were almost clueless as to what it meant at the time. Still, Bant questioned the relevancy of the Halos in it all.

"What are we supposed to do?" Bant asked. It was the only question either of them could ask- with the jumbles about the Halos and the government and such. They had both been smart, but they never learned more about the Halos than a few simple things in history books. Had the government really kept that much from them?

Another mystery means another answer that can't be found within it. Why are we even trying anymore if it's hopeless?

"Smkavinuislin." He blurted out the word. The strangest word any of them had ever heard.

"_Gesundheit_" Bant mistook it for a sneeze, which made Elizah giggle a little. It quite lightened that barren and glum mood to something at least a tad upbeat. It didn't last, though, the good.

"Noâ€¦it's the reverse material. Itâ€¦_repels_ Flood like a similar magnet, but it's not parasitic."

"And where do we obtain some of that?"

"Not on Lacid."

"_Of course._" Bant rolled his eyes. He wasn't happy with that one- it was one of those _there's no hope_ statements- something he himself had tried to avoid letting Elizah hear. He wanted her to have hope more than anything else. Heck, he wanted hope himself. Where would he be without hope?

"There was a second artifact, though." Haza looked up, biting his lip, he seemed to almost enjoy this tidbit of news. There it was. Hope. The hope hid behind the answer; stood there in its shadow.

"It went missing, too." His eyes looked away at the wall. Maybe he

didn't enjoy the news after all, but bracing himself for the next set of words; the next sentence of expected hopelessness.

As soon as hope in them raised, it was shot down. She could believe it, though; she had many hopes that were readily destroyed by othersâ€|and even her self. Once again, a hush fell over the party, they all casted their eyes down in silence.

"I have reason to believe where it is, though." This time, his eyes did show a pleasure of sorts. It was as bright as his eyes. She caught herself staring into them again. That look he held was majestic and once more reminded her of a fey.

At that, they saw her eyes light up. They both saw it. Theirs lighted up, too- but hers reacted the quickest, claspings onto that hope like she waited for it all her life. She did wait a long time-it had been months.

>She wanted to tell Aronâ€|she had to tell Aron and Kyle. It was the best thing ever- they could return to their normalâ€|sort of. They could return to being Spartans on missions- they could return to living lives. She had to tell Aron.<p>

"Alsoâ€|please don't tell Campbell I told you any of thisâ€|" he looked around nervously- his gypsy eyes dancing from side to side. Strange seriousness filled the room, but she halfway ignored it.

First, before telling Aron, though, she had to get weaponry- just incase. She sometimes just felt that- the need to have arms with her at all times- insecurity. She had to get a gun.

"Hey, I'm gunna run to my apartment real quick and get some ammunition." She got up from the chair she sat in and stretched. She had been so scrunched up in that chair all night and all day- it hadn't occurred to her why she didn't think to stretch when she woke up. She should've brought her gun with her.

>It must still be on the coffee table.

>She couldn't think of a reason why she wouldn't have grabbed itâ€|but she was in a hurry the day before and she considered the fact that she forgets to get things in a rush. She decided that she just forgot. That had to be it, right?

She was halfway to the door, thinking her thoughts, before Haza's voice rung clear in her ears from his chair by the wall.

"You can't, there's Flood in the streets."

10. Missing

****Rifle****

****Chapter Ten****

"What do you mean by that?" Elizah stopped dead in her tracks. Her head turned back towards Haza.

"Since the flood are no longer held to the artifact, they can roam this planet freely." Haza tilted his head a little sideways, his face blank- His emotion gone. _Wasn't he sad a second ago?_

"Thenâ€¦I'll go check on Aron"

Haza's eyes flickered down. He seemed sad again, just as sad as earlier, she thought maybe she had imagined it. Maybe that one sentence made him bright up.

>That wouldn't make any sense, though, so she had to have been imagining it, she did that a lot anyways, so she concluded.<p>

_Okay then, I'll just tell Aron first.

>She needs to hear all of this. Then we could tell Kyle, wherever he ran off to.
I'm surprised he isn't kneeling at her bedside constantly, keeping watch over her like a hawk. Or, better yet, a vulture. Kyle, the vultureâ€¦it doesn't really fit thoughâ€¦he's more like a 'momma bear'. _

She laughed at that- Kyle being a momma bear. It made more sense to her, with how Kyle followed Aron around.

"So, how have the scientists been working so far?"

Bant asked Haza- they stood behind glass, while watching scientists perform experiments of sorts. They had samples of cells and other things along the wall. The flood they captured wasn't anywhere visible, though.

"Pretty well, I guess. They haven't really told me anything." He shrugged.

"Oh, really?" Bant wondered about that. _What reason would they have to keep the information from Haza?_ It made some sense, with him being somewhat new, still, the Lacid- but Haza was an important part of the team. It would only make sense to let him in on anything they knew, didn't it?

"They refuse to speak to anyone but Elizah, unless you have some password." Haza shrugged again.

"Why would that be?" Bant's eyebrows drew closer to his nose in confusion. _Why are the Scientists keeping things from everyone but her?_ He couldn't really think of an answer- maybe some of the scientists distrusted them, maybe those scientists also knew her. There was a full range of possibilities- endless possibilities.

"I dunno. Maybe they see her as the leader, or maybe she knows the password." Haza shrugged a third time

"Leader? Password?" He never thought Elizah would ever consider herself as a leader; she seemed a little too introverted to be able to lead a bunch of people. Then again, she was an honest personâ€¦most of the time. She was always trying to do the right thing over all, but she sometimes did bad things too.

"Yeah, I mean, she got that whole dominance mindset." Haza shrugged and shook his head with a grin.

"What?" His words only confused Bant more and more. _What is a dominance mindset?_

"Oh, you haven't noticed?" he laughed. "So you haven'tâ€¦" his

eyebrows raised and he looked away.

Bant's mind was just a little too innocent to what Haza was trying to say.

"I meanâ€¦you guys live together, right?"

"NO. No that's not whatâ€¦. Just no." Bant turned red and avoided Haza's eyes. He rubbed his forehead. He couldn't believe he suggest such a thing.

>I meanâ€¦Elizah'sâ€¦Elizahâ€¦and I'mâ€¦meâ€¦butâ€¦why am I thinking about such a thing!

Haza chuckled, and continued to observe.

* * *

><p>She turned the corner to the hospital room. The door was closed and the lights were off, she tried opening it, but the door was locked, too. She must still be sleeping. She's usually an early-riserâ€¦but then again she's kind or sick. I'll come back later. She needs her rest, anyways.

I wonder why the door's locked.

She spun on her heel and towards the snack machines again. She couldn't help but get hungry with how little she ate earlier. This time she told herself that she'd find a cafeteria of sorts.

After searching a small bit, she was in front of a cafeteria. She wondered if there were any cooks present. She peeked her head between the double doors and looked across the large room- many tables were set up, not used in a while except for one or two. A single chef of sorts stood behind a counter. It was an older lady, and most likely was recruited by one of the scientists or the team. She wore one of those things upon her head that kept her hair back. Elizah couldn't recall the name of it when she thought about it.

The lady knew what she was there for.

"No food has been prepared in advance, but you could ask me to make you something all the same." Her voice was groggy and shriveled- like a witch from a fairytale. Her eyes, in the middle of tired and wrinkled skin, peered.

"Can I have two old-fashioned biscuits with gravy? Like they used to do a long time ago?" Elizah kept herself from drooling. Her mother had always used that recipe that was passed down through the aging world and never faded- it was used back on _earth_ hundreds of years ago.

"Sure, whatever."

She turned and started working, so Elizah slipped out.

* * *

><p>She soon found out that the men were near the science lab that was placed on the other side of the hospital; she followed the makeshift signs that were made following the evacuation. Sick or

healthy- all the people went elsewhere during those weeks.<p>

She turned another corner, pacing, thinking, as she followed the signs.

>There weren't a lot of nurses; she wondered where Aron's nurse was.
_Why was the door locked?

>The answer kept biting at her.
Aron couldn't haveâ€|

>no.
Stop thinking like that, she's fine, she's asleep, she's having a lazy day. She's just sleeping in a little later- it's still early in the morning.

>â€|But why's the door locked?

She found the guys soon enough, and walked to them casually.

>Bant turned away when he saw her approaching; he seemed a little flustered. She figured it was none of her business, but she was still quite curious.<p>

"Speak of the devil~" Haza tuned in, tilting his head up in a smirk. His lids covering a bit of his eyes, he crossed his arms.

Elizah raised her eyebrows, this made it clearer yet more confusing. They were talking about her, but she still didn't understand why Bant looked soâ€|embarrassed.

>Then again, Bant gets flushed sometimes out of nowhere. I do too sometimes, when my mind wonders off and thinks about stuff likeâ€|

>Elizah got it, and as soon as she did, she turned around so they wouldn't see- she was sure they'd catch it anyway. She giggled when she thought about Bant getting any redder- he would feel so guilty.<p>

She started to smell biscuits, she hoped they'd be done soon, her stomach responded to her in a low growl.

"Are you two hungry? I could get you something from the cafeteriaâ€|" She just stood there, her back facing them as she spoke. Her right arm looped around her back and held her left arm.

"I'm not hungry." She could hear Haza laughing- she imagined he shrugged. "But I'm sure Bant is" he laughed even harder. Now that she was calm, she turned around and looked at them. Haza nudged Bant with his elbow and chuckled happily. She could have sworn she heard a muffled giggle, but it must have just been Haza- it made sense to her, with how girly he looked, anyways. Haza was looking ahead at the hallway, though, just smiling. Bant was only covering his face with his hands.

Bant then sighed a heavy sigh of annoyance "Food would be nice, yes." He pursed his lips and gave Haza a sideways glance.

She decided to go get the biscuits. She then noticed the smell was gone- she wondered when that happened. She wondered how, too, because she could have sworn she smelt them a second ago.

"But first, can you ask the scientists what they found? They refuse to tell anyone but you- unless they have some sort of password." Bant was avoiding her eye contact- she could only guess why. It was probably the same reason as earlier.

"Sure, but why are they keeping the information from you?" confused, she brought her hand up and held her own chin- looking at them through squinted eyes. She would think Bant or Haza would better understand science than her. She hated studying sciences. She hated studying. Learning science-stuff made her want to somewhat roll over and die.

"I'd sure like to know." Haza shrugged. Bant noticed how he did that quite a lot- he quite wondered why.

"Fineâ€¦" she grumbled and walked to the door by the glass window; it was tightly sealed around the edges. She knocked on it with a slow and even rhythm.

It opened, as doors usually open, with a click. A scientist with full protection gear-practically a HAZMAT suit- stepped out and removed their mask. They talked in hush voices that the others couldn't hear.

"Password hint: What are Phelibrashans?"

"Zombies, if you get touched by one, you're a zombie too."

Bant and Haza watched as Elizah and the scientist chatted by whisper, neither of them caught a word of it. Elizah soon returned to them. Her hands shaking- fear in her eyes, she looked up at Brant- ignoring Haza's existence. She gulped and her forehead creased-up- she looked afraid, nervous, sad, and every other bad feeling packed into one.

"The experiments all failed. The Flood kept in captivity died completely."

Elizah looked to the ground and shook her head; she looked as if she was about to cry. She pushed past them and ran, full speed down the hallways. They just stood there, watching her leave. All her hope was gone again. _Where am I supposed to go,_ she thought, _what am I supposed to do?_

She kept running until she found the cafeteria again- _might as well become fat before I die. I'm going to have no more chances at life, now. It's already halfway up my arm; it'll eat me eventually. Why do we keep trying only to fail? Once again I have almost nothing to live for! If there is no cure, I'm doomed, screwed, whatever. I didn't want this. I didn't choose this. I didn't cause this. Why, God, is this happening to _me?_

When she got to the cafeteria, the lady was cleaning up; the cafeteria is as it was earlier- empty. The smell of biscuits was not there. There was no one but the old lady who had been there before. There was no food prepared anywhere.

"Oh, someone else came through here. They took the biscuits, said it was for you." The old lady shrugged, looking with those same tired eyes at Elizah.

"No one I know went to get the biscuits for meâ€¦unless Aron's awake, I guess." She swung the door back and forth, moving herself along with it. "Could you make two more anyway?" she asked, just in case someone had stolen her biscuits. Actually, though, one was for Bant,

the second one was originally for Bant anyways. She was going to get him food whether he wanted it or not. Now, though, she knew for sure he wanted it, but that didn't matter.

"Sure, whatever." The old lady sighed and got back to cooking.

Elizah stepped out into the hallway and saw the nurse passing by. She waved her down and the nurse approached- dressed in her heels and her hair in a bun, her glasses on her nose. She looked like a very sophisticated business woman.

"Hey, when did Aron wake up?" She casually just popped her fingers. She had always been told not to, but she couldn't help it.

"Aron Kitsume?" the nurse shook her head, confused.

"She's been missing since this morning."

She was right; someone did steal her biscuits.

More importantly, though, her best friend was missing.

11. That Same Morning

****Rifle****

****Chapter Eleven****

She also awoke on the floor that same morning.

>Her fingers inched around, feeling stone beneath her, the moss grew between the cracks. The moss was soft to the touch, probably green, but she hadn't opened her eyes yet. Something smelled off, but she had become desensitized by then. It was so comfortable in her spot. Se forgot where she was or where she had been before that.<p>

There was warmth, the warmth of the sun beating on her arm. Those violet rays made her skin tingle. Those rays shifted, from her arm to her hand.

>It felt different from the sun.
It couldn't have been the sunâ€|but it was so comfortable.

Her voice box let out a small sigh as she turned away from the warmth of the sun; escaping those rays she was so dearly warmed by. Her eyes still closed, she curled into a ball.

It didn't occur to her, still, to wake up, so she continued to just lie there. She couldn't sleep, but it was still kind of dark.

>She was sure the nurse wouldn't mind her just sleeping there for a while, being as she was the patient and all. She couldn't fathom where her pillow had gone.<p>

Then it finally hit her, she was on the floor, not in the hospital. It was dimly lit where she was- or very dark, but she had felt the warmth of the sunâ€|she thought.

>Her eyes swiftly sprung open, as if a trap catching mice. She could see her hand half-curled-up next to her face. What was thatâ€|warmth?
What happened?_

She shot up. _Where am I?_ It was dark around her, not a ray of sunshine was near her. A torch was lit across from her; the torch upon that wall of stone danced its flame dance with all of its energy and happiness.

Her eyes darted around; there was a passageway, the same direction her feet pointed as she stretched them out. She had a headache. She felt the back of her head with her handâ€|it was just sore was all. She remembered her nightmares. She had one where she was at that welcoming dinner forâ€|
>She closed her eyes, trying to erase it out of her mind. She couldn't stand it.
Her other nightmares flooded back into her memory.

There was the one with Kyle chained to a wall. The one with him in horrid shape and he had the Pry. There was the nightmare where she circled the rug. There was the nightmare where she accidentally killed everyone.

â€|_Waitâ€|_

â€|_The nightmare about Kyleâ€|_

_It was in a dark stone passageway.
>It had torches along the wallsâ€|could that dream haveâ€|?
The dream couldn't have happened! I died!_

She felt herself up and down her arms, quieting her goose bumps. She could hear herself as she unsteadily breathed the musty air.
Something did happen, though, other wise I wouldn't be here.

She heard shackles behind her, rattling, making her goose bumps rage even more.
>She gulped and stood up completely. Slowly, she turned around.<p>

"Don't look, I'm not decent." She heard the voice echo. He was joking, obviously.

She looked to see anyways. She saw an innocent face, staring at her, she gasped in air when she saw it, and froze. His light brown and mystical eyes lookedâ€|normal to her, his dark hair almost covered his eyes- his eyes that were adorned with dark circles.

"Wellâ€|" he coughed out of his throat. "This is embarrassing." He let out a weak laugh, accompanied by more coughing. He was in pain, she could tell by the way his infection of Pry pulsed and breathed. His skin tightened up around it, bracing itself for each movement. She started to realize, once more, the pain she was in. He wasn't wearing much- either he was captured while getting dressed, or he walks around his apartment without a shirt on.

She couldn't think for a second, and she definitely couldn't speak- but just stared.
>She was stuck, not in time, not in moment, not in the earth, nor the ground, but in a way that was indescribable. She just stood, her eyes not moving as she looked down at him there.<p>

She didn't know what to do. She didn't know what to say. She whimpered something unintelligible- so that not even she herself

could understand. Her thoughts collected together, spun a little, and finally settled. Her mind was returning to normal- even in this place while he, half-dead sat chained in front of her. Tears were beating to escape her eyes, but stood still and caught.

"Kyle." She managed to say- that one word that she wanted to say. That one person that she had wanted to talk to for the longest time was finally before her- that one person she missed.

"Hm?"

"Will you marry me?"

He brought in as much air as he could possibly muster, his eyes strewn with a glee.

>"A-arón!" His eyes became wide. "Of course I will! I meanâ€¦pleaseâ€¦can we?" He pulled his arms forward, trying to reach towards her. A smile broke over his face for only moments before he winced at the pain in his chest. The Pry had really gotten a hold of him and he settled down, bringing his arms back to where they had been. Something changed, then, in his face. He became a bit stern.<p>

"Waitâ€¦noâ€¦something's wrongâ€¦you'd never say something like thatâ€¦"

We stared at each other for a small while, his lips barely parted as he observed me. I just stood still- I tried to remain emotionless. The test wasn't over. I needed him to realize that.

"It's you isn't it, HAZARD. If it is, I'm going to get out and break your head on the stone! That's not funny! Okay?" He huffed and he puffedâ€¦as if he could blow a house down. He was angry. He would be angry with a captor disguised as her.
>She caught the part about HAZARD.<p>

Her eyes widened. She knew she had found him- she didn't even know how she did. It wasn't a dream, after all. Her face brightened up, and the dam that held the tears back finally gave in. She covered her mouth with her hand, but spoke anyways, smiling.
>"â€¦It's really youâ€¦"<p>

She dropped back down to her knees.

"What are you talking about?" his eyes darted around, trying to find the answer on his own, but couldn't.

"Only the real you would react that wayâ€¦so Iâ€¦I'm sorryâ€¦" she shook her head, as she held it in her hands.

"Wait. So we're getting marriedâ€¦?"

She stopped and sort-of glared at him "O-of courseâ€¦not." She almost stopped the tears- just so he'd understand how serious she was. She was, though, flushed. _Did I really just ask him that?_ She was _not_ _ready_ to get married- to anyone. She still wasn't sure if she was dreaming or not. She wasn't sure if they'd both live or not.

"Kids?" he smirked, batting his eyelashes at her.

"I'd kill you first." She had stopped crying her tears, now Kyle was being himself.

"I'm fine with that." He laughed. "Besides, I had to make sure it was you, too." He nodded, before flinching at the pulsing pain again.

Instead of him reaching to her again, she reached to him, wrapping her arms around him. She needed to hug him. She swore to herself, silently, that regardless of his condition, if he made a joke right then, she would sock him.

* * *

><p>Flood was roaming the streets- it wasn't exactly an easy drive over to the hospital.<p>

Samuel Campbell was the name she remembered as she ran down the hallways. _Campbellâ€|is it the Campbell on our team?_ It had to be- it was the only Campbell in the area still. She _could_ believe it when Kyle told her it was Campbell. It made so much sense to her, and it made everything just as clear.

According to what Kyle told her, the person keeping Kyle captive was a HAZARD- a walking-and-talking _GRAVEMIND_. It's natural form was the thing she saw when she stepped out of her room that night before- the one that played dead to her sign-language-gun; The disgusting creature with long claws. It could change form- it walked into that lair where Kyle was as different people each time, he told her.

>She couldn't get her mind off of it.<p>

She found the lab, first. Knocked on the door, the scientist stepped out.

>She asked him and he told her that no one had come to check up on their information yet.<p>

"There's a spy among us- one who wants to foil our efforts, sir."

"A spy you say?"

"Keep the research and findings from everyone but Elizahâ€|noâ€|waitâ€|ask for a password."

The scientist sighed, he didn't exactly like being pushed around by Spartans- but he had to do it- his wife had the Pry. If Aron thought it would _produce_ the cure faster, then maybe his wife would _get_ the cure faster.

"Ask them what Phelibrashans are."

"And what are they?"

"Zombies."

"That's racist."

"Yeah, so only those who know the password could guess the answer, you see?" she gave him a weak, yet sweet, smile. _Who am I kidding? That joke is very racist._

The scientists rolled his eyes and returned to his work.

She ran down the hallways again, to her room. The door was open, still; she guessed no one had stopped by. She took anything she needed- a bag with a journal was the only thing of hers that was even in that room.

It had Kyle's notes in it, though, the notes she kept hidden from Elizah and Bant. The notes that revealed so much and so little. After seeing Kyle again, his notes started to make more sense- before, she had no idea what the HAZARD really was- even though the answers were right there in front of her. She had thoughts about it, yes, but she never really fully understood until he explained it to her.

She had to keep the secrets safe.

She heard footsteps coming down the long and empty hallway- echoing loudly.

>She swung to the door and flipped the switch off, locked the door and sat quietly with her back up against the door. The person shook the door handle a little. Aron wondered who it was, she heard it walking away, but she was too afraid to peek.
_It could have been Campbell for all I know. Why risk being caught sneaking around my own hospital room? That would make _anyone_ suspicious._

She sat in the darkness, the lights from the hall peeked through the windows in small, broken rays. She just kept still for awhile- by now she was sure the footsteps were gone. First, she peeked, wanting to make sure, before unlocking the door and stepping out. She closed it behind her and left the light out, she thought a baddie would notice weird light patterns. _HAZARD _is_ intelligent, after all._

She smelled something good- biscuits and gravy.

>She trailed, following the smell, realizing fully how hungry she was. The white tiles reflected the lighting fixtures in an eerie way. She followed the scent to a cafeteria- a cafeteria at which she had no idea the hospital had. She peek through the doors, an old lady was finishing preparing two meals.<p>

She slowly approached the lady, passing the clean and abandoned round tables. She purposely made her eyes look a little wider- thinking maybe she could look adorable enough to win some biscuits.

Who was she kidding, she was a patient there, and she deserved food all the same.

>She could not risk, though, HAZARD finding out that she knew anything- or that she returned- or that she had Kyle's research notes.<p>

She shyly looked up at the wrinkled lady.

"Whom might _those_ be for?" she eyed the biscuits; she could feel herself starting to drool.

"Elizabeth." The lady almost seemed to be growling.

"Oh, shall I take them to her for you?" She looked up to the lady with a smile that would be genuine if she wasn't so good at acting. Really, she was smiling hoping to get food.

"Sure, whatever." The old lady bagged the biscuits and lazily pushed them across the counter to Aron- Whose only thoughts were to bring one to Kyle and eat the other. She greedily grabbed the bag and turned on her heel and left.

She was passing by the makeshift science hallway again before she left.

>She heard talking and stopped by the corner- it was her friends and Haza chatting.<p>

"Are you two hungry? I could get you something from the cafeteria" She heard Elizah say- she sounded a little bit nervous.

"I'm not hungry." She could hear Haza laughing- she imagined he shrugged. "But I'm sure Bant is" he laughed even harder. She peaked around the corner. Haza nudged Bant with his elbow and chuckled happily. She tried to stop herself from giggling, but it failed, she managed to muffle it a little, though. Everyone's faces were looking away- it was her chance to sneak by.

She shuffled by quickly and quietly- halfway through the hallway she glanced back at them. Haza was staring straight at her, smiling.

Other than that, she passed by unnoticed.

12. Once Again

****Rifle****

****Chapter Twelve****

There they went again, there they went again.

>A place where every time they went, at least one person was hurt- by shot or by bite of the Flood. They knew what they were walking into, but they had to go anyways, all bearing a secret of their own.<p>

This time, she wore the containment unit. She wanted to. She had to. He was too beat up to not be armored. She was fine taking the position of President. She could remember that game from simulation-President.

>It would take two teams of in-training Spartans: one team to Protect the targeted person, and another to target them. Now, though, it wasn't a team they were fighting. It was no longer a game. Not everyone would always come out alive, like they would in the games. They were risking their lives to try and reverse the effects of the virus.<p>

They had too much to lose. If they lost any of these repetitive games, they would lose the whole planet, the whole nation, and all of the people who had resided there.

>No. No more games. They had to get this right- no matter the consequences.<p>

It would take the power of a whole squad to capture more Flood, but they didn't have a full six. They had a mere four- a four, who, didn't exactly seem to work the best as a team. Two of them were

completely separate from the rest of the team, Haza and Campbell. They didn't even work together, either, both flied solo.
>Elizah and Bant kept close, though, trying hardest to coordinate their attacks. Trying their best to let only one through.<p>

There was a major difference, though; they planned to get three this time: Three Flood samples. How they would accomplish this, it seemed, would be impossible.
>They felt that losing was inevitable- that they were going to die there; they had felt that every time, actually.<p>

The mouth of the cave looked fleshy, now, too.

As they walked towards the opening, something seemed different. Something seemed more eerie. They almost couldn't figure out what it was. Campbell was upfront, scouting ahead.
>Haza was just in front of Elizah, and Bant was in the back of the troop.
The opening to the cave was different- it was taller and more narrow and long that it used to be.

As soon as each stepped foot in the opening, they could feel the air around them grow colder. She almost expected to see snowflakes fall around them.

Wrong.

Bant could feel something lightly land on his upper arm- like a feather- it tickled.
>He turned his head; it was a Popcorn.
He immediately jumped sideways and his shoulder hit the wall, getting the attention of his fellow Spartans. Springing into life, Elizah shot it off of him with one bullet from the revolver.

Bant, with strange instinct- looked up towards the top of the crevice.
>A nest. Millions of Flood orbs were perched above them, and, as the first flood indicated, they were ready to attack. Elizah followed his gaze upward, and her eyes widened in fear at the horror.<p>

Once again, the gunshot had made them all dance- to and fro in some invisible wind. They were starting to move around, crawling on top of each other.
>As if they were completely aware and thinking, they all started to crawl towards the entrance of the cave. They moved as one big body almost.<p>

"Get inside he cave, now." Everyone heard from Bant's intercom.

>Not a single one of them bothered to look up or back at him- his tone gave much of it away. They all hurried into the cave, with Flood coming up on the rear.<p>

The whole layout had changed within a matter of days, it seemed, because everything was different. The ballroom-sized area was smaller and longer, as the entrance had become. It was roomier to fight, though, which is just enough of what they needed to protect from the oncoming hoards.

The swarm followed their trail in a lively way. "Only let one through every three minutes, only after the one before it is secure." Elizah

reminded them.
>They listened.<p>

Only one of the first few was allowed to pass and She caught it in the container.
>It was as if the rest of the pack noticed, and starting jumping more at a time; it got harder and harder to keep up with.
A loud clanking sound was heard as the machine kept the creature stable in the containment unit.

"I got one!" They heard an exited squeal. "Let another through!" she demanded of the company.
>Another was let into the group, and the machine seemed to eat it.<p>

"One more."

The last one was easily captured as well, and a cheer resounded from Elizah as she closed off the container. She was slowly regaining it- her hope- from each and everything that went right. He could tell, too, and it only made him calmer.

The group took out the rest of the attackers rushing them from the entrance.
>It wasn't over; though- Brute forces from behind them were beginning to gather.
They backed up towards the entrance, but feared more were spawning on the ceilings. Elizah removed a weapon from her back.

He hadn't noticed- none of them had- that she had brought a second set of firearms. Not just one forbidden weapon; but two forbidden weapons.

"I'm tired of obeying the rules."

Which was accompanied by blasts of fire towards the malicious crowd that approached them- all scorched- more advanced towards them, crawling over one another and making distressing sounds. She shot again, one long blast, which wiped the current hoard clean, giving them enough time to escape before more emerged.

They did escape towards the entrance.
>They got out clean.
It almost seemed too good to be true.

>Surprisingly, it wasn't.
One mission going by without any screw-ups or injuries was what they were trained for. The past missions had failure because of many different reasons.
>This mission went well because they were better prepared for each and every circumstance.<p>

Which was her thought, at least.

The only thing to do was leave this place- for good. They were done, and, next time they would be here, hopefully it would be to close the entrance; for it to be sealed off with the entire Flood population inside of it; for it to be permanently gone.

* * *

><p>It wasn't a long walk to find where their vehicle was.
Soon,

they were loading everything into the transportation vehicle.

Elizah and Bant finished first. They both felt a tugging at their arm.

>It was Haza; his eyes flickered from side to side as he motioned for them to be quiet. He pulled them aside behind the vehicle.<p>

"What is it?" Bant asked in a loud whisper, while releasing Haza's grip from his arm.

"I found the artifacts, both of them." He whispered back, quieter than Bant had been, he tilted his head sideways, to look beyond Bant- to see if Campbell was paying attention.

Elizah and Bant both displayed shock on their faces, their eyes all widened. The day was getting better for them. _Where did he get the artifacts? How? Why is he telling us this now?_

Her face lit up. Hope. It was hope like she hadn't imagined it. It was staring her right in the face, and it bore the form of mystical green eyes. She wondered if hope would stay that way- so close to them; or if hope, in itself, would ultimately disappear.

"Remember to keep this secret, okay?" once again, his eyes motioned back and forth, checking the area around them. "I can't say where I got themâ€| or howâ€|"

He nodded his head, silently, and tried to walk away as quiet as humanly possible.

>He was much more quiet, though.<p>

* * *

><p>Bant was driving them all back. Elizah sat across from him in the passenger seat, while Haza and Campbell sat in the back. Different objects were stuffed under each seat.<p>

Bant's eyes looked up and caught Campbell fidgeting with an ebony backpack under his seat. Campbell stuffed it back under and resumed looking out the window.

"Hey Haza, can you grab me something Orangey to drink?" Elizah was reading, a novel. It was one Aron had written- Aron always loved writing. She took off her helmet and set it by her feet before retuning to a chapter.

"Surething." Haza nodded and reached under the seat, his hand felt for drinks. He moved aside a gray bag. There was somethingâ€|smoothâ€|like flesh. It was cool and round andâ€|moving.

He screamed.

>Bant slammed on the brakes, and a Popcorn Flood hit the windshield. It got up, recovered, and crawled around in confused circles. As soon as it realized what was going on, and smelled the scent of humans, it leaped at Elizah with incredible speed.<p>

"Shoot it!" She yelled. Her book went flying as she squirmed- trying to rip the demon off her armor. They had no guns. The guns were all packed up in the vehicle.

>Bant reached across the dashboard and got the pistol out of the glove compartment. He aimed and shot the monster off of her. Its wiggling corpse limply fell in her lap.
She snatched it with her left hand and tossed it out the window.

"H-how did that thing get in here?" Campbell looked around.

>Everyone shrugged.<p>

"Maybe it got in while we were in the cave or loading?" Haza suggested- it was an honestly good suggestion- but it had flaw.

"Yeah, that's got to be it." Bant agreed, and started the car up again.

>Elizah nervously returned to her reading.
They knew it wasn't the truth.

>It would have attacked them earlier, if that were the true case.
The only conclusion was that there was a traitor among them.

>That didn't make sense, either, though. A person, a Spartan, putting Flood in a place- didn't add up. They would be in danger as well. They would also be at risk, unless it was some sort of suicide attempt.
The only logical deduction- was to keep hidden the obvious.

If there was a traitor among them, the only thing they could do was to make the traitor underestimate whom they're dealing with.

>The question, though, was if it'd really give them an upper hand or not in the long run or prove hopeless.<p>

There was one, though, who thought quite differently.

>Were they really bought in to such nonsense? Those Humans?

13. By the ways of realization

****Rifle****

****Chapter Thirteen****

Elizah and Bant went to the lab together.

>She led the way, though, since she seemed to be the only one the scientists trusted.
She still lacked the understanding as to why that was.

Bant noticed her wearing finger-gloves and a long-sleeved shirt; she was hiding her case. She had covered most of it up for a while, he didn't even know how infected she was anymore- which only made him worry all the worse. She was getting more and more sensitive about the topic- her hope was becoming more and more diluted with what she thought was reality.

The scientists noticed them outside of the lab. One stepped out and took his headgear off. It wasn't Thom, the scientist they had spoken to days before, this one looked sterner, and his appearance scared her a bit. They had all wondered, though, where Thom had gone.

"Where's To-" Elizah had started to speak, concerned. Immediately, though, before she could finish, the stern man started to shake his head back and forth. His eyes were sad, but he kept that straight face.

It wasn't that hard to figure out; Thom was dead.

Elizah brought her hands and covered her mouth, but the scientist only shook his head.

>"Listen, we're all in this together, and we're willing to die to find that cure. We all knew about the risk of doing this and we accepted that."<p>

"How didâ€|?" She trailed off. She couldn't exactly put into words what she was asking. 'How did Thom Die?' she couldn't say it. It was hard to mention death at all anymore- with it seeming to be creeping up so close to them at every turn.

"One of the samples took him overâ€|completely. Weâ€|" he looked away, obviously shamed. He rubbed his forehead. He seemed, to them, to have known Thom fairly well. It wasn't easy for him to let Thom go.

"You did what you had to do." Bant cut in, before the situation got anymore depressing. It was only going to make everyone upset- especially her. _God knows what happens when Elizah's upset._

The scientist already knew it was his duty, but he still wondered why 'what he had to do' seemed to do more harm than good; seemed to cause more pain and stress than relief.

"Has there been any progress?" Bant asked. He was glad that this scientist was actually communicating with him. Thom had been so much more specific about talking to Elizah. He felt like he had more authority.

The scientist only shook his head from side to side- no progress had been made with experimenting on the flood. Nothing had gotten them closer to getting better. Nothing was helping.

She turned on her heel and ran away again. She hated it- all of it. She thought she might as well die at any moment. She would have rather experience being struck down by God than have to become a creature of the night. She kept running and running.

She didn't know, as always, where she was headed- in lifeâ€| in the buildingâ€| anywhere. She was just about to pass the waiting room before she stopped.

Kyle was there.

She hadn't seen him in forever.

"Hey Kyle!" she waved with one hand, her right hand. She was too sensitive about the Disease the wave with her left.
>He waved back, silent. Why's he sad? She thought- _I know what will cheer him up._

"When's the wedding?" She raised her eyebrows and turned her head almost completely to the left side. She always had fun teasing him

about it, she knew about his cute obsession with Aron. The way he followed her around. She would usually joke with him about a "wedding" he didn't know about.

After awhile, when he had caught on, he would reply with 'tomorrow hopefully, I still need to ask'. She awaited this fun reply that they always had laughed at. She wasn't really as close to Kyle as Aron or Bant was- but she sure liked to tease people- and Kyle was very easy to be teased.

"What wedding?" He shrugged- a causal up and then down of his shoulders.

>He hadn't responded like she wanted him to.<p>

_Waitâ€¦what?

>She laughed, confused, but laughed. She wondered if he didn't remember- if he had just forgotten. She reasoned that it had been quite a long time since she had cracked that joke. _Yeah, that had to be it. He forgot, right? Right._

"Whatever, I'll see you later." She walked away, a little worried. It had always worked on him. Always. Something was wrong. It felt weird-like the time Kyle and Bant started to argue on that mission. That wasn't like Kyle, either.

>Aron went missing on that same mission.<p>

Actually, it made more sense than she really wanted to admit. Kyle was on that mission and would've stuck by Aron's side no matter where she ran- even if she said something or did something he couldn't forgive. Kyle wouldn't let her walk off. He wouldn't let her be left alone.

Maybe he just forgot, she reasoned, _it was just a joke._

No, that joke involved Aron, he wouldn't forget.

Who was that person she had just talked to, she wondered, because for sure, it wasn't Kyle. What bothered her more than the fake Kyle being there was that it had taken her so long to realize it.

She had to get away from there. Had to. She didn't know where to go or what to do.

>She kept walking on and on. She couldn't run because of her fears. She was trapped in this hospital with a fake Kyle, and Lord-knows what else.
And Aron was missing.

>Where did Aron go? Is she okay? How am I supposed to find my way without her? I'll get lost.<p>

She didn't realize the signs or where she was walking to, but somehow she ended up back at the lab. She wondered if there was a reason she was back here.

>Maybe there was.
Maybe there wasn't.

>There was only a single way to be certain; and that was to wait and see.
Maybe there was a force pulling her there at that point in time, a secret force, that as she stepped around the corner to the hallway and saw Bant, a scientist stepped out of the lab- it was the same one they had talked to earlier that morning. He held a clipboard and had a worried look on his face. Elizah didn't like that look.

At that very moment, Bant stood up and walked over to the scientist,

while, at the same time, Elizah approached from the corner she had stood halfway behind. She scurried and scuffled to get closer. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.
>She could only guess what had happened. Unsurprisingly, her guess was right.<p>

"One of the samples has died. Again." He shook his head. "There's only one left, now."

Not only had one died, but also died so quickly- within the time she talked to that _person_ and her running around the hospital. She wondered if she could have stopped it if she stayed behind. She wondered if it would have been any better if she had stayed there with Bant and waited.

No.

She had found a traitor among them. To her, she couldn't decide if that was really worth it- whether it was more important or not.

>She turned her thoughts around.
What was done was done.
>There was no way she could have stopped the sample from dying, either, but she still felt sort-of guilty.<p>

The scientist returned to the work in the lab- cracking down codes- testing.

>Bant sat down. He wondered what it meant to her, the dying sample, if she would run away this time, or if she'd finally get over it and realizes that everything wasn't going to go perfectly.
She had always wanted life to play out that way- prefect. Everything she wanted in life had to be perfect.

Why then, he wondered_, did she become a soldier?_

Once again, she confused him. She didn't even do anything to confuse him that time, it just happened between thoughts.
>She sat down next to him, speechless.<p>

Something was formulating in her brain, she felt like she was so close to the answer, yet so far away. It itched at her, almost as much as her hand did. Her hand started to tense up. She was afraid she would lose it- and then what would become of the perfection she craved?

Truly, though, she confused herself.

>It wasn't just everyone else. She couldn't understand it either- her strange behavior- er strange thoughts- her strange everything.<p>

"Bant." She leaned on him, she was breathing slowly. Her voice almost rang like a light bell. It would have been an intimate moment if the setting were right- if so many things hadn't gone wrong. No. They both felt a distance- they were almost as distant as strangers from each other.

"Hm?" He just adjusted his shoulders a little, and kept staring straight forward. It was as if time was stopping- slowing- life was swallowing them up. Time was what was killing them. They needed more time. Time to find a cure; time to find Kyle's research. Time.

"Pray with me?" He heard her ask. He turned his head slowly, but saw her staring right at his blue eyes- he own eyes were dull and bright. It was a strange thing to see.

Praying was something she did often. She believed in a God somewhere out there. He didn't, but he always prayed with her when she asked- it meant a lot to her, somehow. She believed that there was a God who could heal people and answer wishes, and who made and loved every living thing. If she felt like praying, then there was still hope.

Maybe it was that full shine in her eyes.

One thing he didn't understand about her view of a "God" was why He made the Flood- or why he let it come into existence. Those itching and evil parasites were what had thrown them into such turmoil in the first place. He hated the Flood.

"Sure."

"Dear Lord, please help us to find the cure, and find Aron, and Kyle, and that you'd hold Thom's soul in your hands. Amen."

Usually, her prayers weren't that short- but she felt it was appropriate that she didn't constantly push her beliefs on Bant. She had wanted him to see things the ways she did, but she didn't want to scare him away, either.

>She had scared a lot of people away in her life.
She didn't want to repeat past mistakes.

Endlessly, it seemed, they sat there in silence.

>After her short prayer- it had seemed that anything they could say to each other drifted away from their minds. Both of them just stared at the white wall ahead.<p>

Bant's mind, though, began to formulate. It began to connect everything that had happened in the last few sleep-deprived months he had been through.

_Kyle was researching the Flood.

>The Flood caused the Pry.
Elizah and Aron have the Pry.

>The Artifact mission was a miscommunication.
The artifact attracts Flood.

>The second artifact repels Flood.
Trying hard to use the Flood.

>Hazaâ€¦found the artifacts.

The artifacts.

The arti-â€¦!

The artifacts!

Could they maybe be used toâ€¦!

"Elizah!" He halfway jumped out of his seat, but stopped, in fear she might fall over. She almost did. A smile was beginning to break over his face.

A solution.

Maybe even a solution to the Pry.

"What is it?" She groggily blinked. She had been falling asleep on his shoulder.

>He had no idea how he missed that. She started to feel alarm, and immediately leaped out of her chair.<p>

"I have an idea." He smiled at her, as he finished standing on his two feet.

To her the smile could only mean hope- there was something they could do. It meant there was possibly a way out. It meant an escape.

He grabbed her by the hand and went to knock on the lab door.

14. Where the Aron Things Are

****Rifle****

****Chapter Fourteen****

She had gone to and fro from different places that were open and her apartment to get food. Most times, she avoided going out in public. She stocked up her fridge a little bit with food from the stores. It wouldn't be a long time, she resolved, because for one she couldn't take care of him forever. Second, she couldn't leave him in that cellar forever.

So far, she had been lucky; she had not once been there the same time HAZARD was.

>Maybe it was just pure luck- she thought maybe she was being protected somehow. Overall, she didn't know what was causing her streak of fortune, but she sure was thankful for it.<p>

He was feeding her information he overheard, found out, or already knew. Catching her up farther and farther with each short stay that she visited him. She considered it a hassle- to have to take care of him so much. Part of her, though, enjoyed it.

>But even that part of her would never admit to that. Ever. Being happy to be around Kyle was like nonsense to her. _Complete nonsense. Nothing good will come out of this. Pointless. He's going to get his hopes up again- then where would I be?_

Something, though, tugged at her to keep going- to keep striving on towards the end. She had no idea where the end was supposed to be, though. Whether it was then or the next day or some years later in the future. Maybe it would never end.

>She didn't even know what type of end she was looking for, either- an end to bringing Kyle meals- an end to the Pry and the HAZARD- or an end to her life.<p>

As the Pry slowly ate away at her- what would become of them. The Pry was taking him, too. They had had it for maybe months. She was surprised it hadn't turned them into lost souls already- or did it. She felt like a lost soul with how she wondered about- shooting Flood that jumped at her in the streets- walking everywhere in the shadows to not be seen- for what, Surviving a few more months?

Maybe it was as pointless as it seemed- maybe it was as pointless as Elizah thought it was. Maybe it was soâ€¦_pointless_â€¦that they were all wasting the last minutes they had together trying too hard.

>Maybe their effort would prove true.
Or maybe it would cost everybody's lives.

Once again she used that secret entrance. She checked every corner behind her carefully, making sure she was alone before moving the TV. Just incase though, she kept her sword nearby. The sword was very handy- it was infinite and never wore down. Plus, the whole no-bulletsthingwas so much easier to keep track of. The Flood stood no chance to her shining limb-taker. She had to be careful, though, not to let the Pry get to her- it would steal her energy at random times and cause her to collapse. So, even with the assistance of the glowing blue, it was best to avoid the fleshy creatures in general.

She moved the TV forward and plopped down behind it. She removed the rug like she had done for a lot of times that week- like she had done once earlier that day. It rolled back the same way it always had.

>That dark stone passageway that she slipped into seemed more menacing every day. If she were caught once, they'd both be doomed to die.<p>

Regardless, she stepped down the stairs in a sequence of threes and stopped at the bottom. She waited until she heard three taps and rattles of prison chains.

>It meant he was awake, alive, and more specifically- he was alone.
She sighed and with a glass container in tow, she walked down the dark corridors- she had started to get used to it. The stone and moss and eerie disgusting smell hadn't changed, though.

She found a spot next to him to sit down and started to get the forks out of the shoulder bag she brought.

"What's for dinner tonight, darling?" He joked, smiling at her.

It made her angry that he would joke while she had risked her life to bring him food two or three times each day. The gripping pain was bad enough; she didn't need him to act so â€¦_himself_â€¦ at a time like that. She hoped he would be a little more serious.

She knew how to mess with him though, and she did. She sighed and started to put everything back- the forks back in the bag, the container closed again. She got up.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow, sweetheart." She turned around and started to strut off. He didn't think she was serious until she got to the stairs. She stopped.

Footsteps.

She had to run- to scramble- to find a hiding place. Where could she hide from it, she wondered, as she tried to silently sneak around. The footsteps were coming down the stairs. She heard the chains rattle once- the signal that there's someone else there. If she could have glared at him, she would have.

>I already know that, you jack.

She almost started running. The figure coming down the stairs was slow and heavy. She continued down a pathway past Kyle and found a weird dugout room. There was a desk, a random basket of blankets, and a table in the center of the room as if to decide war plans. She found a blue blanket, and, being as small as she was, she slipped behind the computer desk moved a little from the wall. The desk was like a huge brick in shape, she wasn't even sure if it was _meant_ to be a desk. The steps got louder and louder towards the room she was in.

The steps stopped.

"Where is the artifact?" It spoke in a loud, evil voice: the voice of a monster. It was scratchy and hoarse, and just horrid.
>Aron could only hear their conversation from where she was.<p>

"I don't know." The chains rattled. She could only assume he shrugged.

"You don't know _now_." The monstrosity laughed and was sounded like a gargle.

"What did you do?"

The thing let out a maniacal laugh. "One of your little friends has itâ€|but not for longâ€|"

She heard rattling of chains, Kyle seemed a little angry. It sounded like an escape attempt, almost, but it seemed staged. He was trying only to distract the monster for her. To make it leave.
>For one, so he could eat. Also because the only person he cared about all that much was somewhere farther down the hall.<p>

"Are you enjoying your slow death?" It asked, sarcastically. The words felt like nails along a chalkboard- a screeching and bitter ear-burning sound.

"Yes, actually. I enjoy it _so_ much." Kyle responded, enthusiastically nodding his head.

"I bet."

"Monstre mauvais" Kyle executed his French with precise accent. He smiled, taunting the beast that stood before him.

The creature did not understand French, but caught the hint that it was an insult.

>Aron heard an unearthly growl before Kyle was punched in the stomach. She could hear him take the hit- she could hear him coughing. She almost gasped, but she didn't- she was trained to be silent and silent she would be. She was an assassinâ€|snuggled up in a blanket and hiding behind a computer desk.<p>

"Count your blessings." It scoffed in an angry and ugly tone. Before starting to continue down the corridor towards that dugout room that she was hiding in. The creature stomped and breathed heavily.

She was trying to maybe envision it, the monster. She wondered if it was scaly or slimy. _Well,_ she thought, _it must resemble the Flood

in some way_. _Or, being an 'advanced' Flood- would it look different?_

Kyle stayed silent. He couldn't stall it any longer. Even if he were ready to take a million punches for her, she'd kill him for doing that. If he held the beast there long enough, but any longer and HAZARD would have been suspicious. It could just prove worse for both of them. _Aron, I hope you had enough time to hideâ€¦!_

It made it to the room and walked around.

_Is it looking for something? What will it do if it finds me? How am I supposed to defend myself? Will bullets work on it? Will my sword work on it? Shoot. Shoot. Shoot. Darn. Darn. Darn. Dadgummit. Go away. Go away. Go away. It can't find me here. No. Stop it. Stop walking towards me. Stop. No. Stop.

>She stayed as still like the trunk of a strong, _strong_ tree. Her only thought when the monster stopped in front of the desk was a hope that it wouldn't hear her heartbeat, feel her presence, or whatever it was supposed to do to detect prey; she hoped that system would happen to malfunction. She tried to breathe as quiet as possible, but she felt like she couldn't take in the air without making it sound like typhoon winds. She hoped it would be over soon.

The creature started typing away, and, after ten minutes stopped again.

>She could hear its breathing- it sounded constricted. She hoped someone was strangling it- but she knew that not to be true. It was too illogical- it was too impossible. The monster made a 'tsk'-like sound with an elongated hiss before hitting a single button violently and the footsteps soon started to fade deep down the passageway.<p>

Thirty minutes passed with the footsteps gone before she emerged from behind the desk. She got out her sword. He couldn't stay there. She had to take him out of the chains. _Who cares if HAZARD gets pissed, I'm not leaving Kyle here any longer._

She walked up to him, and stared at the bonds that held him back. He glanced up at her and smirked a little.

>"Staring? You think I'm cute already?" he chuckled.

How could he take a hit in the stomach like that and still crack jokes to me? Isn't he in pain? She felt like crying. She wouldn't admit it, and wouldn't let ears fall, either. Her sad eyes bore a shade of sky, and, without losing eye contact; she cut straight through the chains on the wall.

>She put her sword away and reached out her hand to help him up.<p>

He hesitated. He wondered what would happen if the monster came back. It would be angry- all hell would break loose- who would the horrid beast take it out on?

>What was there to do but stay there? He could only wonder. His thoughts that delayed his answer soon came to a halt when he took her hand and pulled himself up. He couldn't doubt her. There had obviously been a plan in those blank eyes.<p>

The only uncertainty as they left was why the monster left the

entrance to the under ground tunnel open, instead of closing it as it always had done. She wondered if it noticed it was open when it got there.

* * *

><p>She marched into the building, slicing creepy little monsters before she got to the door. It was almost impossible to get in with the Flood running around outside and the extra security cameras and doors blocking the path inside.<p>

The white floors looked the same as they had the last time she was there- dull. The whole hospital was dull. The whole hospital was dusty.

The hallways hadn't changed, either. Everything was in the same place. She needed to find the lab; they would all be there, most likely. She turned a few corners before seeing shocked faces.

"Aron!" Elizah ran up as fast as humanly possible into an embracing hug that almost knocked Aron off of her feet. She stumbled backwards at the full force of her friend who weighed a bit more than her- If she hadn't been a Spartan, that hug would have probably knocked her out cold. Elizah pulled back and smiled a worried smile, but it was a smile all the same. She was so happy to see her alive and well.

"We have so much to tell you that we found out-"

"Good, then I won't have to fill you in on anything." Aron interrupted her, and she wasn't smiling. It made Elizah step back once more, confused. Bant decided it was his queue to join the conversation- something was wrong.

"Huh?" Elizah barely let out, it was almost as light as a whisper.

"We'll start with what I know and work backwardsâ€|firstâ€|" She trailed off and looked intently into Elizah's eyes for a few seconds, then into Bant's. Checking for a yellow flash of any sort. Nothing. They were still themselves. Neither of them were the HAZARD. Both of them needed to hear- both of them needed to know.

"â€|The artifact mission was a setup by HAZARD itself."

15. Experiment

PHEW. OKAY GUYS. This is the last Chapter that's gonna be posted on the interwebs. I'm sorry for being such a freaking weirdo by making the ending exclusive...but the reason is...and I know it sounds stupid and is going to be outright impossible...but I hope to someday get a hold of the copyrights from Microsoft the get 'Rifle' and 'Shotgun Strategy' Published**. Crazy, I know; but because of cache and various other reasons, I don't wanna put the whole thing up here. It would make it just over all super difficult (more difficult than it would be, anyways). I will be posting up a bonus Chapter, but after that, no more new Rifle chapters on this site, or any other. Kthnxbai**

****Rifle****

****Chapter Fifteen****

"You know, I've heard this story a _million_ times, mom." Lilac crossed her arms and looked up at her Mother.

>"I mean, it's a nice story and all, but you've never tell me the ending and I'm tired of it." She uncrossed her arms and set her hands on her hips and stomped her right foot. She was right-handed just like her mother was, and resembled her, too, but acted completely different.<p>

"Wellâ€¦I thought it might be obviousâ€¦everyone always lives happily ever after in every story." The mother shrugged her shoulders, and smiled at the three children who sat around on the couch.

"That's not true." Lilac shook her head. She was getting slightly angry with her mother.

* * *

><p>Aron had slipped outside when everyone had calmed down; they had really reacted when they heard about the HAZARD for real. She finally let them see the research and everything- even though it was risky with the HAZARD itself haunting the hallways. She didn't tell them everything, thoughâ€¦like about Kyle being alive and her taking care of him. She didn't tell them about how she let Kyle stay in their apartment without permission.
Truthfully, it was the only safe place he could be hidden- the monster had been at the Hospital and the UNSC Research Center the whole time that Bant and Elizah were- they had alibis. No one would suspect Kyle had gone there after his escape.

Still, the thought of the monster leaving the door open ate away at her. She couldn't pinpoint a single reason. She didn't want to assume it forgot, because that would have been too simple for a monster with a master plan. She didn't want to think it pitied her- _what's there to pity? Do I really appear that pathetic to it?_

She sighed and shuffled around the parking lot. Her sword was unsheathed and ready to spring at any given moment, but she felt like she wasn't safe- like she was being watched. She turned around every now-and-then to check, but nothing. Not even bits and pieces of Flood. The parking lot was too clean. She shuffled more and walked out of that parking lot into another.
>Then another.<p>

She ended up at the UNSC Research Center- it wasn't for finding cures, unfortunately. It was for other research- she had no clue, though. That was something Kyle would know.

The double doors had to scan her before letting her enter. The security had become better than the last time she was there- when she found out that the Kyle she _thought_ she knew wasn't really Kyle. When she proposed to him.

>She had to stop and think about that one- why did I do_ that?

>She tried to erase the thought as quickly as possible, but the more she suppressed it- the more it surfaced. It was a slight predicament for her, and, in embarrassment at herself, she started to

tint. She had to calm herself, though, or else the lady at the check-in-desk would get suspicious of something-or-another.

She sighed and returned to her normal pigment, as she avoided the desk and the eye contact of the lady that worked there. Walking through the hallways, she still had no idea where she was going-maybe to Kyle's office.

>No. Haza had looked through his office already.
Hazaâ€| what was he doing in Kyle's office that day?_

She stopped dead. As she was thinking, she had passed Campbell's office. The sign on the door was makeshift, but she figured that he was new to Lacid anyway.

>Her head slowly turned towards the door. It wasn't closed- the door was ajar.
She gulped and started to think about it.

>Campbell's officeâ€|I wonder if he's in thereâ€|what would he be doing in his office, anyways- scheming world domination or destruction?

She relaxed her shoulders and turned the rest of her body to face the door; her hand stretched out and grabbed the knob. She didn't have to turn it, just open it. She feared what might be behind the door. It was the office of the man she thought to be a monster, after all. Her hand almost started to tremble against the knob and she drew the door forward- away from herself.

Nothing.

The office was empty. There wasn't a person in sight- or a Hazardous monster, either. Her eyes flickered around the small room- trying to take in as much as possible. Normal. It was a normal Office. Not a single thing amiss. She couldn't understand it exactly-she thought that _something_ would be off or strange in some way.

The thought quickly faded when it was replaced by a much different one- one that noticed the computer and, out of all curiosity, wanted to know what was on it. She stealthily trotted over to the big leather chair; she grabbed the mouse as she sat down. There were two pages minimized on the clear screen.

>She clicked up the first one.
It was used for satellite transmission.

>Bingo, she thought, _what is that guy up toâ€|?_

She scanned it for a minute, trying to take in all she could muster.

>Satellites. Lacid. Kalefront. Unity. Jailbird. It all sounded like Jargon to her- except for the fact that Unity was a colony planet she knew of. She wondered if the rest of the strange words were colony planets aswell.
Her eyes then noticed something else, though- the other minimized window. The bar showed it was called "Zombie" and was a written document.

>It could be war plans or destruction of the human race or-

Click.

>She opened it.<p>

_La'Shaun Campbell remembered the first time he was here on Lacid. He was born here. He had been in the academy like many other children,

to become a Spartan. He fought in the war. The one where many of the Covenant fleets died, while most humans survived._

_He had grown up in a broken family during that time.

>Not only his parents had a horrid relationship, but his two siblings Sam and Kayla, too. Kayla was always afraid of their parents and went to her brothers for help, but they never helped her.

He stood there in that far stretch of grey stones. Four in a row he stared at as the autumn wind blew.

First, he had left here after the war because of the four grey stones with rounded tops and epitaphs.

_Mary, his mother, died at the hands of his fatherâ€|

>Kayla, his sister, died in an accidentâ€|
Trish, his wife, and Sarah, his daughter, died because of something that happened in the warâ€|_

He could remember each day as if it were the day before. Each day before each accident were the last days of his life- the last day he saw them living through. He died along with them in his mind. He barely spoke, ever since that last day. His brother Sam, named after their father, went off to study on a different UNSC colony planet. His father, Samuel Campbell, went who-knows-where.

He practically became a walking zombie after that, with nothing to truly live for.

Her eyes flickered up. Haza was standing in the doorway.

"Oh!" she hopped up from the office chair. "I was just checking my messages and the Colony Planet National Newsâ€|umâ€|this was the closest computer I could find." She reached down to minimize both windows again- as if closing her page. She hoped that was what it looked like, at least. It felt weird for her to lie to Haza- she thought of him as an ally, but she still felt like she needed an excuse.

"I just came to see if Campbell was here." He shrugged casually, and his devilish green eyes looked away.

>Aron hesitated to leave. The awkwardness of it all almost kept her in place standing there and both of them averting their eyes in silence.<p>

"I'll get going, then." She started to walk out; Haza just stood still by the door. They continued to avoid eye contact directly, but she caught his gaze on the glass across from her- the glass across the hall from the office.

>He was watching her leaveâ€|through maddening yellow eyes.<p>

* * *

><p>Aron found Elizah and Bant in the makeshift research hallway. Elizah was being overly silent, which was not a positive sign, while one of the scientists talked to them. He was making hand movements and enthusiastically shaking his fists- some weird encouragement thing she guessed. As she got nearer, and was still unnoticed by the group, she saw that Elizah was distantly looking at the floor. Bant had an arm around her and was trying to talk to her; she seemed to be

responding in broken sentences.<p>

Aron started to rush towards the crowd- she was worrying that there was something wrong with Elizah. She was wondering if something happened.

>She wondered if it was because of the HAZARD. If it were, all of Hades would break loose upon HAZARD via Aron and a glowing blue sword.<p>

The group saw her shuffling towards them and turned to greet her. Elizah quietly looked up into Aron's eyes, she had a sort-of puppy-dog-rabbit-or-some-other-adorable-animal-pouting-frown-face. It wasn't the playful pout, either. She wasn't having fun or throwing a small tantrum- she was being quiet because she was scared. That was why she looked like a frightened doe- Fear.

"We were wondering if Elizah would participate in some experiments with Smkavinuislin and finding the cure." The scientist turned to Aron; his face blank, emotionless. Almost like Spartan soldiers were during war. It was sort of like a war to the scientist, though, in a certain way.

"I don't knowâ€|" Elizah looked down and shook her head. She wanted to- she needed to, but _what would happen? Will it really work? _She wasn't good at making decisions. She wasn't good at just deciding something that could easily cost her life. She couldn't just decide on it so quickly or so easily.

They stood there in silence for a short while. Aron's mind was turning and twisting.

>"I'll do it."<p>

Everyone looked up, their eyes away from Elizah and unto Aron. She volunteered to be the test subject. She volunteered to risk herself. Her case of the Pry was closer to her heart and organs- it almost covered her neck. Elizah's face had more fear in it than before. Fear for her best friend; fear that struck her to the core.

"Right this way." The scientist nodded and turned on his heel.

She followed.

Elizah just seemed to shrink- she was withdrawing- she was becoming a person they had thought she would never be again. She was beginning to lose all sight of hope and truth.

>She started to chant old prayers out loud.<p>

Aron was guided into a huge door- one that was heavily secure. She started to understand why they chose that area of the Hospital for 'lab' uses- it was heavily walled and guarded. She imagined that they could hold mental patients there fairly well. She continued to be led past that door through new ones. They turned a few corners before finally entering a room that looked like a room that could be used for surgical purposes. She wasn't surprised.

There was a small amount of 'lab' staff nearby that held containment units of sort. She guessed that they half expected for Flood to pop out of her stomach. A scientist or two motioned for her to lie down. She did.

They put a needle in her upper arm, while burned. Anesthetic started to pump through her; she couldn't feel anything anymore. Her eyes watched as the scientists strapped her down- she almost felt like a victim in a horror movie. Which would be hilarious to her if it weren't her current life situation- with HAZARD that walked about as whoever he pleased and an infectious disease eating half of her body.

One scientist held tweezers with a shard of something pinched between. Her body started to tremble and shake as it got nearer to her. That shard was making her skin feel like it was burning. She wondered if the Anesthetic wasn't working. Her Pry-infected area started feeling like it was trying to jump out of her skin- to escape- to run away. She screamed in horror and pain. She couldn't take it- she couldn't find out what was happening to her body.

Elizah was snuggled up in a blanket outside of the first huge door and heard the shrill shrieks that emitted from her. With each one, she prayed louder and louder- repeating old prayers she learned as a child.

It only got worse, though, the screams.
>Elizah covered her ears. Your best friend is fine- something else is screaming- not her- she's fine. She's fine. She's fine.
Elizah started to shake her head back and forth, which let tears loose. She wouldn't let Bant near her, then. She didn't want a hug or comfort when something horrible might be happening to Aron.

"Stop it! Please!" she yelled, jumping to her feet- she had enough. The blanket she had drifted to the floor. _Who was screaming? _She wondered, because she didn't hear anything anymore. No one. The screaming was gone.
>It had ceased completely.<p>

End
file.